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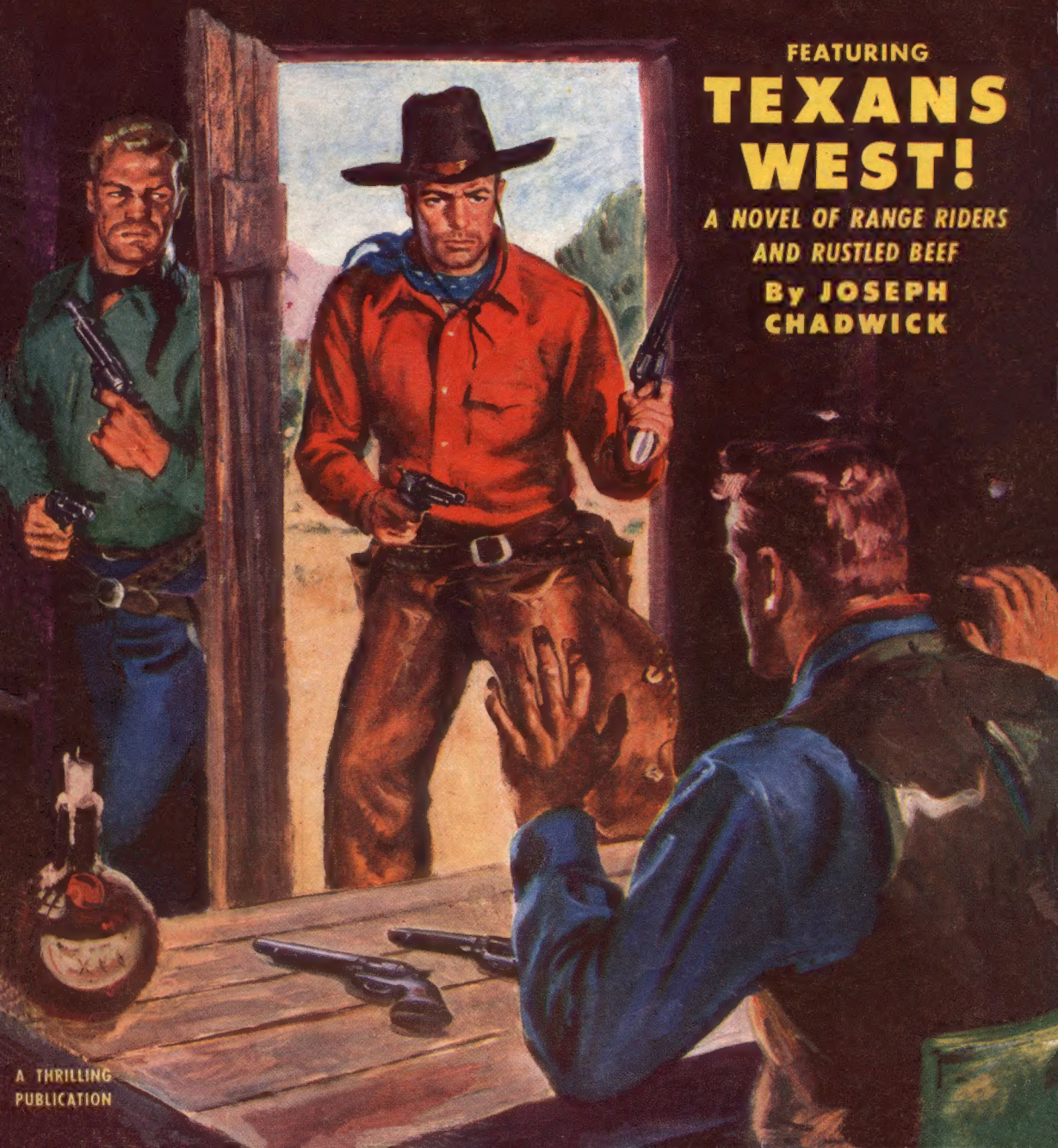

FEATURING

TEXANS WEST!

A NOVEL OF RANGE RIDERS AND RUSTLED BEEF

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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WEST

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 77 No. 2

AUGUST, 1952

TWENTY-SIXTH YEAR

A New Complete Novel

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MORRIS OGDEN JONES, *Editor*

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The Chuck Wagon

FRONTIER PRIZE FIGHT

By CURT FERRIS

THE BATTLE for law and order in the West was not won by sixgun law alone. Countless gory fistfights are recorded in Western historical pages. One of the bloodiest fights, however, was conducted in a "civilized" manner in Virginia City, Montana, in 1865. It was the wild frontier town's first major sporting event, and lasted a mere 185 rounds!

The fight was unusual in other respects, too. The contenders were both Irish, and loved to fight, but here the similarity ends. Con Orem was five feet, six and a half inches tall and weighed but one-hundred and thirty-eight pounds.

Hugh O'Neil was five feet, nine inches, and pushed the scales down to ring up one-hundred-ninety pounds of muscle.

The men's personal living habits differed somewhat, too. Orem, according to the reporter of the Montana *Post*, one Mr. Dimsdale ". . . made it his doctrine to touch, taste or handle *not*, either spirituous or malt liquors or use tobacco in any form."

This statement makes one wonder a bit at Mr. Dimsdale's reportorial ability, for in the same issue of the *Post* there was an advertisement that read:

"Con Orem begs to inform the public that he has on hand an assorted stock of the Best Liquors, Cigars, &c. His saloon 'the Champion' is adorned with the best set of SPORTING PICTURES west of New York. Private lessons in Boxing and Sparring once a week."

Perhaps this inconsistency is unimportant. One thing about O'Neil, however: he not only liked plenty of liquor and tobacco, but indulged in both with the delight of most miners. So in one sense it might be said that the fight was one between the forces of good and evil.

Newspaper Extra

The Montana *Post*, of which Mr. Dimsdale, an Englishman, was editor, reporter and printer, brought out an extra that day

(Continued on page 8)

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LOSE WEIGHT Where It Shows Most REDUCE MOST ANY PART OF THE BODY WITH

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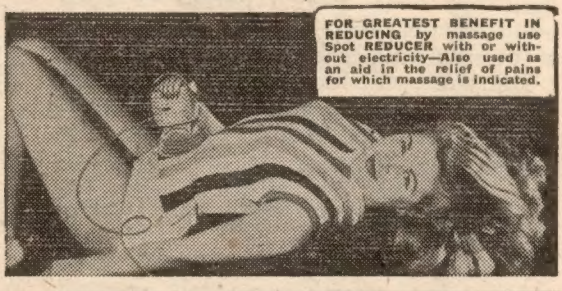

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LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE

THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 6)

of January 3, 1865—at least six thousand words about Virginia City's first championship fight. It is unlikely that any fight has ever been reported in such minute detail before or since, or in a style so unintentionally humorous.

Dimsdale, who had attended Rutgers in England, did everything in a flamboyant way. It was said that in spreading the alarm about about a fire he discovered, he rushed into the street yelling, not "Fire," no, sir, but "Conflagration! Conflagration!"

The illiterate miners wouldn't have known what on earth he was talking about had they not seen the smoke and flames.

Shortly before two o'clock, the contestants entered the outdoor ring, which was eighty-five feet long and twenty-eight feet across.

Both men presented a colorful appearance: O'Neil in green, with a harp and stars and his name embroidered on his costume; Orem with a single star against black, with red edges. In addition, Orem had girded himself with a sash of stars and stripes with an eagle, and bearing the motto: "May the best man win."

The Rules of the London Prize Ring were read, and pretty much ignored thereafter, before an audience of thousands. Most of the money was on the bigger man, O'Neil, a condition that did not worry Orem, the little man who did not touch liquor or tobacco.

The bell rang, and Mr. Dimsdale settled down to report the fight as follows.

ROUND 2: Very little show, but Hugh rushed Con into his corner and there were sharp exchanges on the ribs. O'Neil obtaining a right-hander on the mug from Orem. When closing, both down, Orem under. In running to raise Con, Joe Riley (the referee), struck Hugh behind the ear with the toe of his boot, receiving as an acknowledgement a rap on the potato trap from Hugh's left.

ROUND 3: Orem let fly his left on Hugh's knowledge box.

ROUND 6: The "close" sounded and both fell, Hugh undermost.

ROUND 7: Hugh's hand hit the post with great force, spraining it and leaving it worth little for the rest of the fight. Con undermost.

ROUND 9: Heavy exchanges on the body, Con suffering two smacks near the seat of wickedness from Hugh's right.

ROUND 17: Con popped in his right on Hugh's olfactory department which brought the ruby. (blood, that is!).

ROUND 20: Con's left daylight began to look dark.

ROUND 30: Hugh got away neatly twice from Con's left. Con laughed and dropped a remembrance on Hugh's kissing trap.

ROUND 37: Hugh took a pull at the bottle, with renovating effect.

ROUND 39: Con's left paid a visit to Hugh's right listener."

An Unresolved Question

Three hours, five minutes later, with the passage of one-hundred eighty-five rounds, the fight was called off on the insistence of the groggy spectators! Neither man had gone down for the count—but both were willing to try, if feebly, to continue through the night.

Bets were called off, and the fighters each received one thousand dollars in gold dust, in addition to money thrown into the ring to them by yelling spectators. The crowd and the fighters retired to the Champion Saloon and refreshed themselves far into the night.

The only question that was unresolved: Who was the boxing champion of Montana?

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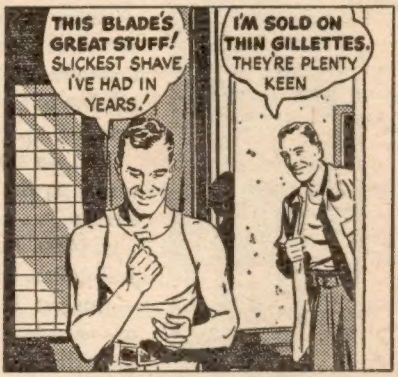

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TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

Moncaga's Last Laugh

A true story by BOB *and* JAN YOUNG

MINERS at Columbus, Nevada, expected to ring in the New Year of 1874 in a big way. True, they were a mite short on girls to liven the fun at the dance they'd planned, but one American girl had ridden in from nearby Fish Lake Valley, and a Chilean girl was there to play the guitar as a part of the uncomplicated orchestra. The rest of the "girl" partners were half of the miners, who tied handkerchiefs about their arms to designate themselves as being one of the "ladies."

The thumping and stamping was getting into full swing and everyone was having a great time, when Victor Moncaga hove into sight. For some obscure reason, he strenuously objected to the Chilean girl playing in the orchestra; so strenuously, in fact, that when she refused to quit playing, he grabbed her guitar and stamped it to pieces on the floor.

Now, most of the miners took a rather grim view of this turn, and one Tony Rivara was particularly incensed. He wasn't long in telling Moncaga about it, and got a sharpened file in the chest for his pains. Moncaga's boots scorched the board floor as he scuttled out of the dancehall and away from the temporarily stunned miners.

A posse, lead by two Columbus peace officers, was quickly formed, and it was only a few minutes later that Moncaga was lodged in the jail, which constituted a rickety shack.

With their fun spoiled, the miners had nothing much to do but discuss what they were to do with Moncaga. "Fun's fun," they agreed, "but when it spoils a dance for everyone else, that's too much."

In a few minutes, a small group of miners lured the two peace officers away from the jail, inviting them to one of the local saloons for some drinks. When the officers had a few rounds and were about to return to the jail, they found a tight circle of miners about them—a circle they were unable to pierce. They shrugged, and turned back to the bar to enjoy themselves.

Meanwhile, another group of men had gone to the jail, pried off a few boards and snatched Moncaga out into the moon-bright desert night. He was marched down the street to where a butcher's windlass stood, and was strung up like one of the beef carcasses which generally hung from the frame.

His dangling, twitching figure made a gaunt outline against the brilliance of the moon, and if he made any protest, the sound was drowned out by the guffaws of the committee thinking over their joke on Moncaga.

The lynchers then returned to the saloon where, after a respectful interval, they released the police officers and hinted that all might not be well with the prisoner.

"Just have a feeling," one said, "that Moncaga may have had an attack. Shortness of breath. Was afflicted, you know."

The saloon echoed with the bald jest on Moncaga and the officers. Then they set themselves to consuming all the "busthead" in sight. New Year's had to be celebrated, anyhow.

The somewhat sympathetic officers, finding their prisoner gone, looked casually about the small town, then reported that Moncaga must have left the territory. "Surely, he wouldn't have hung around," they opined with a smile.

In the even brighter light of the next day, Moncaga was found still attached to the windlass, much to the surprise of everyone in Columbus. A hastily called coroner's jury inspected the evidence and decided there wasn't anything that could be done. "He's dead, ain't he?" And with such irrefutable logic, the matter was dismissed.

But about a week later, two deputy sheriffs from San Bernardino arrived in Columbus, both trailing Moncaga in connection with the killing of two citizens from their area.

Columbus miners were quick to inform the officers that Nevadans didn't trifle with killers; they hanged them, and that's what had happened to Moncaga.

The officers looked at one another and began to laugh. "If you characters hadn't been so law-abiding, and so hasty, you'd have been eligible to collect the $2000 reward offered for Moncaga, if he was captured—alive."

Somehow, the Columbus Vigilantes imagined they could hear a hollow laugh from the grave, which was marked simply "Moncaga."

TEXANS WEST!

A Novel by JOSEPH CHADWICK

CHAPTER I

Hostile Land

THEY WERE Texas men, the three of them, tough-looking men with six-shooters at their thighs and rifles on their saddles. They rode a land historically hostile to Texas, the Territory of New Mexico. They rode it with a deliberate brashness that masked a measure of uneasiness, until one of them, Jeff McVey, finally said, "Well, this is it."

They quartered down a sage-grown slope, scattering a band of sheep on the way and ignoring the shouted curses of the Mexican herder. Below was a broad grassy flat, a part of a vast sweep of range extending to a barrier of mountains hazy blue in the distance.

There was great activity on the flat. A herd of several thousand snaky, longhorned cattle was undergoing brand-changing, and two

He felt his right fist crash solidly against Brock's face

Jeff McVey and his hard-bitten Texas waddies were off their range in New Mexico—but they were after rustled cattle and, come hell or high water, they'd get 'em back

dozen riders were at work.

McVey said, more to himself than to his companions, "A big crew, a big outfit."

The branding crew had thrown up a makeshift pole fence across the flat, from the base of the sage slope to some craggy bluffs a quarter-mile beyond. There was a narrow gateway in the fence, and when a brand had been worked over, the animal was choused, bawling mournfully, through the opening onto the range to the west.

A half-dozen fires kept the irons hot, and the hands—most of them *vaqueros*—worked expertly. There was noise, dust, confusion; but it was an orderly confusion. These men were all tophands.

On the east side of the fence, the cattle were scattered widely. McVey rode among them, followed by his companions. He read the brands that were to be changed, and they were Texas brands—his own JM-Connected iron among them. His face tightened up. It was a lean, angular face, handsome in a rugged fashion. His skin was weathered to the color of bronze. His eyes were a smoky gray. At the moment, they were humorless eyes.

He said again, "Well, this is it."

One of his men said edgily, "I'd rather it wasn't, Jeff. I don't like the odds."

McVey gave him an impatient look. "Quit scaring, Tip," he said. "I'm not going to pick a fight."

He headed toward the branding fires nearer the fence. There was a shallow creek running through the flat, and a chuckwagon with its canvas fly up and its team unhitched stood by the stream. The cook was busy at the rear of the wagon. A little upstream a horse stood with lowered head, drinking. The rider stood beside the bronc.

THE MAN he'd called Tip said, his voice charged with surprise, "Take a look at that, will you? Chris, you ever seen anything like it?"

Chris Wyatt, the third of the Texans, drawled, "A pretty little pinto pony."

That wasn't what Tip meant, and Chris knew it. McVey looked at pony and rider, and surprise showed on his face. The rider was a girl. A pretty girl in a country where any sort of women were a rarity.

She was a tall girl, and McVey could see the pride in her in the way she stood with gloved hands on her hips, her shoulders squared and her head high. She wore a dark green riding skirt with a wide, silver-buckled belt, tan boots, a white shirtwaist. A bright green scarf was knotted about her slender neck, cowhand fashion.

She wore no hat. Her hair was free to the sun, and a breeze played with it. It was darkly blonde, a soft mass the color of old gold seen in a shadowed place. Her gaze met McVey's, and he saw her eyes widen. The distance was too great for him to be sure, but he thought that her eyes were gray.

McVey stared. He had seen Mexican women and girls of great beauty, here in the Southwest, but never had he seen a woman of his own race as attractive as this girl. He experienced a sudden quiver of excitement that was entirely different from any he had ever felt before, and for the first time in his life he thought, "Here is a woman I could want." Then, as he marveled about her effect upon him, he told himself, "She already belongs to somebody." He could not imagine that so perfect a creature might be unmated.

As he stared, one of the *vaqueros* galloped past him in reckless pursuit of a steer. The rider had his loop ready, and suddenly made his throw. It happened sometimes, to the best of ropers. A miss that left the *vaquero* with an empty loop and the steer racing on, still free. But usually a rider could wheel his cowpony about and make good his second throw. This time, however, the animal was a wild one.

It was a big roan steer with saberlike horns, a wall-eyed beast that pounded across the flat with its head down and its tail curled. The girl saw her danger, and leaped for her pony. The horse shied away, and she missed her grasp at the reins. She grew panicky then, and ran toward the chuckwagon. The steer saw her, swerved after her.

The *vaquero* cried, *"Por Dios!"* and the cook shouted something that made no sense at all.

McVey jabbed spurs to his horse, jerking his rifle from its boot as the big gray struck out at a run.

McVey had shot buffalo on the Kansas plains, and he tried to tell himself that this would be no more difficult than downing a great shaggy bull. But it was, and he knew it. So there was an unspoken prayer behind the shot he squeezed out from the back of his galloping mount. He knew he had this one shot; no more. There would be no time for a second shot. The crazed steer was too close to the running girl.

Somehow he hit his mark, and the slug splintered through the animal's skull and into its brain. The steer went down in a threshing heap, not ten feet from where the girl had fallen to her hands and knees.

McVey breathed again, and said, "Ah!" in heartfelt relief. The gray was still running, carrying him past the fallen girl. He pulled the mount to a rearing stop at the edge of the creek, booted his rifle, and lifted his hand to his face. Sweat had broken out on his forehead; he wiped it away, and reached for makings. His hands were trembling as he rolled and lighted his cigarette. He'd had a bad scare.

MOST of the riders knocked off work and came hurrying toward where the dead steer lay, some mounted and some afoot, drawn by the shot McVey had fired. They were yelling back and forth, asking each other what was going on, and the *vaquero* who had let the steer get away was sheepishly explaining what had happened. McVey's two riders, Tip Harmon and Chris Wyatt, sat their horses off to one side. They looked a bit uneasy.

McVey rode back at a walk, seeing that the girl now was standing beside the chuckwagon. She looked badly upset. McVey swung toward her, reined in, smiled, and touched his hat.

"You're all right now?"

"Yes. Just a little frightened."

"A mean one, that steer."

"I don't know how to thank you."

McVey smiled again. She was every bit as attractive as he had imagined. Seeing her close up, he thought that there must never have been a girl quite so wonderful. And, yes, her eyes were gray. A sort of silver-gray. He said, "No need to thank me. No need at all."

A strident voice behind him said demandingly, "You there, hombre!"

McVey gigged the gray about and saw one of the crew riding toward him, a black-bearded giant of a man who, though certainly in his sixties, had an arrogant manner that instantly rubbed the Texan the wrong way. The rider reined in facing McVey, scowling, a shaggy old brute with a beak of a nose and murky black eyes that bored at a man like the twin barrels of a shotgun.

"You sure played hell with that steer, hombre," he said sourly. "That kind of target-shooting is mighty expensive."

"Maybe you'd better find out why I shot it," suggested McVey.

"Miguel says you up and fired before he

could get his rope on it."

"Miguel's doing some bragging."

"You calling a Crown man a liar, hombre?"

"McVey's the name," McVey said. "No need to keep calling me hombre."

The big man sneered through his beard. "Maybe I should call you Mr. McVey," he said. "We just paid ten dollars for that roan steer, Mr. McVey hombre. I've a notion to make you pay for it. Yeah." His eyes began to glint. There was a devil in this man. "Yeah, hombre. I've a mighty big notion. If you ain't got the cash, I can have it taken out of your hide."

The girl stepped forward. "Brazos, please!" she said.

The man called Brazos ignored her. He studied McVey, sized him up, measured and weighed him. McVey smiled; it was more of an ugly grimace than a smile. He touched heels to his gray and rode over to the dead steer. He swung around the carcass, returned to face Brazos. The entire Crown crew watched him. McVey gave Brazos another of his humorless smiles.

"Brazos, I'd see you in a hotter place than this," he said, "before I pay you for killing one of my own steers. That animal wears my JM-Connected iron." He took a long drag on his cigarette, then flipped it away. "And that's not all. You've got a lot of my stock in your herd here, along with cattle in some other Texas brands I recognize. I lost a herd on the Llano, Brazos, and I've been trying to find out what became of the beefs. It looks as though I've found out. At least a part of 'em ended up here on the Crown range."

Brazos swore. "You accusing the Crown of being a rustler outfit, McVey?"

McVey shook his head. "Not that," he said. "It was Comanches that jumped my trail herd. The Indians did the stealing. But the evidence is that you have stolen property in your possession."

BRAZOS yelled, "Stolen property, nothing! The Crown bought this herd from a man named Juan Trujillo. And the Crown's owner has the bill of sale to prove it!"

"Your bill of sale is a worthless piece of paper," McVey said. "And you know it. The Crown's owner knows it. Juan Trujillo is a trader in stolen stock, a damn *comanchero*. He got my cattle from the Comanches." He was silent a moment, staring levelly at old Brazos. "I've come a long way," he added, then. "Too far to turn back without my cattle. How do I get them, old man—with or without a fight?"

Brazos had a ready answer for that. "Why, you're going to have to fight," he said, grinning hugely.

McVey nodded, and said flatly, "All right. Have it your way."

He touched his hat to the girl, then lifted the gray's reins to turn away. He held the gray in, however, when Brazos said, "Turning tail, eh? Running away from a fight, eh?" The old man looked disappointed.

McVey eyed him narrowly. "You take me for a fool? Twenty-five to three. Odds like that don't make sense. I'll be back, old man, with enough riders to take your Crown outfit apart."

"Why go to that bother, McVey? I've got a man here who's spoiling for a fight. I've a hunch you can't whip him, but if you can—"

"If I can, I get my cattle?"

"That's the idea, McVey," Brazos said.

McVey dropped from the saddle, unbuckled his gun-rig. Brazos called, "All right, Brock. Come and take this rough-talking Texan."

McVey hung his gun-rig on the gray's saddle-horn, then turned to look at the man called Brock.

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CHAPTER II

Foul Fighting

WORDLESSLY the man Brazos had indicated swung down from a roan horse, a short but powerfully built man with a coarsely handsome face bristly with rust-red stubble. His eyes were a bright china-blue with a bright eagerness in them. There was a crooked smile on his lips, and McVey knew that this Brock was a man who loved to fight. The man removed his gun-rig and tosed it to another Crown man, then he spat on his big hands and closed them into fists.

He said, "All right, McVey. Get at it!"

The girl said, "Brazos, don't do it!" Her voice was shrill, off-key. "You know that Major Bristow doesn't want such things to happen on his range!"

Brazos said, "Jan, never mind. Get on your pony and head for home." His voice was gruff, but still was somehow gentle with the girl. "I know what the Major wants and don't want, and one of the things he sure doesn't take to is your hanging around with the crew. You head for ranch headquarters, girl!"

McVey heard her make some reply, but without catching her words. For Brock was coming at him, rushing with his head down and his shoulders hunched, and a wicked gleam in his china-blue eyes.

McVey stood his ground, and that was a mistake. He struck out, missed his punch except to knock Brock's hat from his head. Then he was caught by Brock's heavy arms, with Brock's head butting him low in the chest and driving the breath out of him.

Reeling under the assault, McVey fell against the chuckwagon and was pinned there with Brock's hard head forced against his breast-bone while the man's arms tightened viselike against the small of his back. He drove a fist to the back of Brock's neck, then clubbed him a second time. And Brock, with a wild yell, broke his crushing hold. McVey ripped his knuckles against the bridge of Brock's nose, and slipped out from between the wagon and the man.

Brock came at him in a crouch, taking his knees and toppling him over backward. The Crown rider went down with him, and the two of them, locked together, threshed wildly about for a moment until McVey, getting a leg free, drove a knee into Brock's face. Brock cursed, rolled away, and McVey scrambled to his feet.

He waited, gasping for breath and feeling the hard pounding of his heart. He was tingling with pain in a half-dozen places, but there was a savage exultation in him. He knew now that he could whip this burly hardcase. He watched Brock slowly rise and wipe a smear of blood away from his nose.

The Crown riders were a strangely quiet lot. They were doing no yelling to egg Brock on. But old Brazos kept urging nastily, "Come on, Brock! What ails you, man?"

Brock swore. His grin was gone, and the look in his blue eyes was now one of wariness. He was no longer eager. But he muttered an oath, and rushed in.

McVey eluded the grappling arms this time, but took a punch in his left side that lifted him off his feet. His face twisted with a spasm of pain, then he jabbed hard at Brock's face—once, twice, and a third time. Brock staggered, but recovered and kneed McVey in the groin. There was an explosion of pain, and the Texan found himself rolling on the ground. A boot slammed into his belly, but he flung himself aside before Brock could kick him a second time, and dived at the Crown man's legs.

He got his hold on Brock, and spilled him over backward. Brock hit him once while falling, a jolting blow to the head that started a ringing in McVey's ears. Brock landed heavily, on head and shoulders, then heaved over onto his face and lay there squirming.

McVEY stood swaying, groggy, the ringing still in his ears and his vison fuzzy. He saw faces in a blur—the faces of the Crown riders, of the girl, of the old man called Brazos, of his own two riders.

He shook his head vigorously, and his his vision cleared. He saw Brock slowly picking himself up, and Brock's face was smeared with sweat and blood and dust. And Brock's eyes were filled with hate.

Cursing him, Brock came at him. There was no longer speed in the man's rushes, though, and his arms, reaching for that hugging hold, were c l u m s y. McVey slashed a fist to the man's face, then quickly backstepped. Brock kept coming, and again McVey hit him and retreated.

Brock howled, not so much with pain as with rage, then flailed his arms in great swinging blows. A mighty punch caught McVey on the left temple, and the world spun crazily. Brock's jubilant yell roared in his ears, and he struck out wildly in panic.

He felt his right fist crash against Brock's face, solidly and with such force that he himself felt the impact all through him. His brain stopped reeling, and he saw Brock down again. The Crown man was sprawled on his back, his face slack and his eyes dazed. McVey lifted a trembling hand and wiped sweat from his face.

His uncertain gaze found Brazos. "He's licked?"

Brazos's bearded face was ugly with rage. "Ask him, damn you!"

McVey turned back to Brock. The man was trying to rise, levering himself up by his elbows. "Enough?" McVey asked. "Enough, Brock?"

Brock cursed him in a weak and shaky voice, and kept trying to rise.

McVey stood well back, knowing he could finish it the moment Brock gained his feet. It took Brock a long, long time. He rolled over onto his belly, then thrust himself upward by straightening his arms. He got one knee under him, then the other. All the while his hot, angry eyes kept staring at McVey. He was beaten, and he knew it. And McVey had a feeling that this was the first time in his life that Brock had taken a beating. That alone could explain his hatred of McVey.

He was poised on one hand and both knees now, ready to heave erect—and yet not wanting to rise. He wanted no more of McVey's fists pounding him, but pride would lift him and hatred would drive him forward. Then at last one of the other Crown men spoke, calling, "Here, bucko!" He tossed a branding-iron to Brock. The iron fell within easy reach of Brock's hand. Brock grabbed it, and sprang to his feet. He swung the iron high, like a club.

There was a scream from the girl.

McVey flung his arms up protectively, and the iron struck him heavily across the left forearm. He was knocked to his knees, and then, before he could recover, the iron clubbed him down again and found McVey's head. There was one bomb-burst of pain, then nothing at all . . . .

They told him later, Tip Harmon and Chris Wyatt did, that he had regained consciousness and, with their help, managed to get onto his gray gelding and ride away from the Crown range. McVey could only take their word for it. He knew nothing of the departure from where the Crown man, Brock, had downed him with the branding iron. There was nothing between the blow and his finding himself back at his came near Fort Bascom. But somehow he had made that long ride, and if he hadn't been conscious, he had at least seemed so to Tip and Chris.

He regained his senses in the middle of the night, to find himself in his blankets. He sat up and saw where he was, saw his men—he had brought eighteen of them with him from Texas—bedded down about him. He saw one man rise, go to the dying fire, and throw on some brush. He saw the horses in their rope corral. The fire blazed up, and the man who had fed it said, "Jeff, how are you?"

"I feel queer, Tom," McVey said. "Blamed queer."

He brought up his knees, folded his arms atop them, lay his head on his arms. Everything was spinning crazily, all of a sudden. His stomach was churning. Tom Shannon lifted the coffee pot from the fire,

filled a tin cup. He brought the cup to McVey, hunkered down, and said, "Drink this. It'll do you a world of good."

McVEY had to hold the cup in both hands. They were shaking uncontrollably. The coffee was hot and black, and it did do him good. He handed the empty cup back to Shannon, who was eyeing him worriedly.

Tom Shannon was the best man in the bunch. He'd been with McVey for two years, ever since the Comanches had burned his ranch headquarters on the Concho and stolen his small herd of cattle. He was a lean, solemn man of forty-five. There was often a faraway look in his eyes and a bitter expression about his mouth. Shannon's wife and teen-aged son had been alone at the ranch when the Comanche raiding party struck.

The son had died fighting. The wife had been carried off, but the Comanches hadn't got back to the Llano Estacado with her. Mollie Shannon had killed herself when the war party stopped to make night camp. Somehow she'd got hold of a knife. Shannon, with McVey and some others, had found her body the next day.

Shannon lighted his pipe, and said, "You had a queer look when you rode in with Tip and Chris. They thought you were all right, except for the gash at the side of your head. You acted all right, but there was that queer look. You asked for trouble out there, Jeff."

"And got it."

"We'll take you to Fort Bascom in the morning and have the post surgeon look at you."

McVey lifted a hand and felt a bandage about his head. "I'll be all right by morning," he said. "I've got a good, thick skull. Who patched me up? You, Tom?"

Shannon nodded. "That Crown bunch is a tough one, according to Tip and Chris. But I reckon you aim to tangle with 'em again. Or did you get a bellyful?"

McVey was silent a long moment. He remembered seeing his JM-Connected cattle in the Crown herd. He could see old Brazos mocking him. And Brock hating him. He had his memory of the girl. Jan, Brazos had called her. His mind conjured up a startlingly clear picture of her.

McVey had his pain to warn him to be done with Crown, but he said, "I'm going back there, Tom. Yeah, I'm going back!"

He lay back, wrapped his blankets about him, and finally slept . . . .

It was mid-morning when McVey awoke. He crawled from his blankets, pulled on his boots. He rose, stood swaying. His head throbbed with pain, and a quivery feeling ran through him. The eyes of his men were upon him, most showing some measure of sympathy. Being the sort of men they were, they knew what pain could be—or if not pain, then hardships akin to pain.

Like McVey himself, they were all veterans of the Confederacy and had had their share of fighting and of the hurt that came out of war. Too, they were all of the Texas frontier and lived hard and violent lives.

Some were like Tom Shannon, and had suffered wounds that were merely of the flesh. To a man, they were with him because there was nothing better for them anywhere. Texas, since the war, was not a pleasant place, and a man grabbed at any sort of job even though it meant, as a job with Jeff McVey did, taking part in a private war.

They loafed about the camp. One man was whittling, another was fashioning a rawhide lariat, a third played a game of solitaire with an ancient deck of cards, but most of them lounged in the shade doing nothing, not even talking. Only one man, Pete Macklin was busy. Old Pete, with a game leg he'd come by at Gettysburg, was the cook, and he was already preparing the noon meal.

JEFF McVEY went to the creek, knelt, splashed water onto his face. It felt cool, soothing. So he stretched out and ducked his head. The shock of the cold water seemed to ease the pain in his head. Tom Shannon came to him, and said, "Let's have a look at that gash, Jeff."

McVey sat back, and Shannon removed the bandage. "Healing," Shannon said, in his toneless voice. "How do you feel? Still have that queer feeling?"

"No. Just a headache."

"Want to go to Bascom and find a doctor?"

"An army doctor?" McVey said. "He wouldn't waste much time on an ex-Johnny Reb. I'll be all right, Tom."

He ran his hands over his head, squeezing the water from his hair. He sat there for several minutes, letting the glaringly bright New Mexico sun dry him. And thinking of the Crown outfit. It had been a fair fight, and he had beaten Brock beyond any doubt. Then another of the Crown men had thrown that branding-iron to Brock, and so there had been nothing fair about the end of the fight. The Crown had to be paid back for that, somehow.

McVey said, "I'm going to Las Vegas, Tom. You come along."

Shannon nodded without interest. Curious about nothing in life any more, it did not matter to him why they should go to Las Vegas or anywhere else.

"All right," he said, in the tone of a man ordered to do a chore.

CHAPTER III

Free Advice

HOLDING their horses to a walk, because of McVey's condition, they rode away from the camp after noon chuck. After a couple miles Tom Shannon, who kept watching their back-trail, said, "I thought somebody was hiding in that china motte near the camp. I was right, and now the hombre's following us."

McVey looked back, saw that the rider was holding his horse to the same slow pace that he and Shannon traveled. "Looks like a Mexican," McVey said. And added, after a moment's thought, "A Crown man, I'd bet. Old Brazos must have sent him to spy on me."

"Want me to get rid of him?"

"No. He's not bothering me any."

The rider stayed on their trail all that afternoon, never shortening their lead nor letting them get so far ahead that they were out of his sight. They could not ignore him entirely; it was impossible for them to put him out of their minds, and every so often one or the other looked back. And the Mexican was always there, still the same distance behind.

It was growing dark when they reached Las Vegas. The town was still a native adobe town to a large extent, but the gringo influence was beginning to change the old ways. Las Vegas was no longer just a drowsy village on the Santa Fe Trail. It was lively with Yankee bustle. The newer buildings were of frame, and they were occupied by Anglo-American businesses—stores, saloons, shops, hotels, dance halls.

The change was touching even the native dress. As many dresses with high necks, long sleeves and hoop-skirts as low-cut blouses, short skirts and *rebozos* were seen on the women. And the men sporting braided *chaquetas* and laced *calzoneras* were in the minority. But if the natives were adopting American garb, the American settlers in Las Vegas were adopting New Mexican customs. The town was as free and easy as ever, and far more rowdy and lusty than in the old days.

Saddle mounts stood at every hitch-rack, and the center of town was crowded with a huge freight outfit in from Missouri, and Santa Fe bound. The street was thronged with people. A stage-coach came racing in from Santa Fe, six little Spanish mules in harness. A big bunch of riders galloped along the main street, *vaqueros* wearing high-peaked sombreros and gaudy serapes.

McVey halted before a *cantina*, telling Shannon, "We'll have a drink."

Leaving their horses at the *cantina's* hitch-rack, they entered the ancient adobe

They fired only when there was a chance at a target

building. A man was strumming a guitar, and a girl was dancing and clicking a pair of castanets. Her red skirt swirled high, and her smooth slender legs had a coppery-sheen in the lamplight.

Her black eyes found McVey, and she smiled as she pirouetted. It was a flirtatious smile. McVey smiled back, but even as he drank in the wild beauty of her, he thought of the blonde girl at the Crown Ranch. And it was then that he knew that no other woman would ever entirely satisfy him. The girl at the Crown ranch had somehow got into his blood, and that made a poor fool of him.

Men were gathered about a monte bank to one side of the room, betting noisily. Others were at the bar, and McVey and Shannon went to its far end and ordered whisky of the fat man behind it.

As the barman took his money, McVey said, "Friend, could you tell me the name of a good lawyer in this town?"

"*Si*," the fat man said. "I could tell you the name of the best, senor. But maybe you would not go to him."

"Why not?"

"He is not an *Americano*, senior."

"I don't care if he's an Apache Indian, if he knows his law books."

THE fat man smiled. "His name is Hernandez Otera," he said. "His house is—but you do not know Las Vegas, maybe?"

McVey said that he did not know the town.

The fat man nodded. "No matter," he said. "I will find someone to take you to Senor Otera's house." He went to the

door, shouted to someone outside. Returning to McVey, he said, "The *muchado* outside will take you, senor—for a small coin, of course."

McVey thanked him and, followed by Tom Shannon, left the *cantina*. Their guide was an urchin with a wide smile, bare feet, and wise eyes. Shannon nudged McVey, nodded in the direction of a man who lounged against the front of a store on the opposite side of the street. The man was a Mexican, and McVey knew he was the one who had been on their trail all day, for his horse, ground-hitched nearby, was a pinto such as their spy had ridden. The man stared insolently back at McVey, a cigarette drooping from his lips.

McVey turned to Shannon, and said, "He's getting me right bothered. We'll do something about him if he follows to the lawyer's place."

They followed the boy, leading their horses. The house of Hernandez Otera stood at the edge of town. It was reached through a gate in a walled patio. McVey gave the kid a quarter, and received in exchange a happy *"Muchisimas gracias, Senor Tejano!"*

The boy went scooting back toward the center of town, and McVey and Shannon, leaving their horses ground-hitched, entered the patio. Lamplight glowed behind the windows of the adobe house. They halted just inside the gate, listening. They heard the *clop-clopping* of a slow-walking horse. The Mexican had followed them all right.

McVey said, "Grab him, Tom."

He crossed the patio, stepped onto the arcaded gallery of the house, knocked on the heavy, iron-banded door. A man opened the door to his knock, a pudgy little man who said, *"Quien es?"*

"My name is McVey. Jeff McVey. I haven't much Spanish, senor."

"No matter, Senor McVey. I have a little English."

"If you're Hernandez Otera," McVey said, smiling, "the best lawyer in Las Vegas, I'd like to talk with you. I don't want legal advice, but I'd like some information from a man who knows the law."

"I'm Hernandez Otera," the pudgy man said. He chuckled. "You are a man to split hairs, eh, senor? But there is a difference between legal advice and information about the law. And you have come to the right man. You are a Texan, no?" He didn't wait for McVey's reply, but added, "I think I already know what information you want. Come in, *amigo*."

Otera took McVey into his furnished study, gave him an armchair, a glass of wine, and a thin Mexican cigar. A log blaze in the fireplace added cheerfulness to the room. There were book-filled shelves, and a desk upon which a book lay open.

Otera seated himself at the desk, smiled as he sipped his wine, and said, "Yes, I can guess what information you want, Senor McVey. After all, there is only one thing a *Tejano* cattleman would want in New Mexico."

McVey lighted his cigar, leaned back in his chair, stretched his long legs. "So far as I know, two men have attempted what I aim to try," he said. "First, there was Colonel Goodnight. He's one of the biggest cattlemen in Texas. He lost cattle to the Comanches, traced the stock to the Territory, hired a lawyer, and went to court. The story he told afterwards was that he was lucky to get out of Las Vegas with his life."

Otera nodded. "That's right," he said. "Goodnight went to court to replevin his property. He had witnesses who testified that about three hundred thousand head of stolen Texas cattle and a hundred thousand stolen horses have been brought into the Territory through the *comanchero* trade. Some of his witnesses were *comancheros*, in fact. He was defeated, and ordered to pay the court costs."

"So he tried it the legal way and failed."

"Well—yes."

"Then there was John Hittson."

OTERA nodded again. "I heard of Senor Hittson's activities," he said. "He did not stay within the law."

"Maybe not, but he succeeded where Goodnight failed," McVey said. "Hittson came to New Mexico with a band of armed men. He carried powers of attorney from other Texas ranchers, and he looked for cattle in their brands as well as in his own. He found plenty. He returned to Texas with ten thousand head of cattle." He paused, took a long drag on his cigar. "I've got eighteen men with me, Senor Otera," he said then. "Not as many as Hittson had, but every one I have knows how to fight."

Otera smiled. *"Los Tejanos,"* he said. "They all know how to fight."

McVey went on, "I'm not fooling that I'll get away with what Hittson did as easily as he did. I'm not apt to be so lucky. The *comancheros,* and the ranchers who bought my cattle from them will be ready for a second raid of their herds. But I'm going to try it, Senor Otera. I lost a herd of twelve hundred head to the Comanches, and I'm going to get back as many of those cattle as I can—or die trying." He smiled wryly. "My mind is made up. That's why I don't want legal advice. You—any lawyer—would advise me to do as Goodnight did, not Hittson."

Otera nodded. "That is true enough, senor," he said. "So I won't offer advice. But what is the information you want?"

"This. What legal steps can these people take against me?"

"The people with your cattle in their possession?"

"Yes."

"They may prefer rustling charges against you if you repossess your stock by force or by trickery," Otera said. "But I'm inclined to think they won't. It's more likely that they'll meet force with force, trickery with trickery. Being the receivers of stolen property, they'll not want to appear in even the Territorial Court against the owner of the property. But they may enlist the aid of law officers or the Army, to a point just short of going to court. You may as well face that, Senor McVey."

"That's information I wanted," McVey said. "The law officers and the Army will side the *comancheros* and the ranchers dealing with *comancheros*?"

"I'm afraid so. The lawmen will protect the people who keep them in office. As for the Army— Well, it has been rumored that at least one officer at Fort Bascom—which is the logical place from which to start breaking up the trade—is financially interested in it as a backer of one of the leading *comancheros.* In a word, senor, the trade is far from being discouraged by the Territory of New Mexico."

McVey nodded, got from his chair. "That's what I wanted to know, Senor Otera," he said. "That the people I'm up against won't dare take me into Territorial Court, but will use lawmen and the Army against me. I needed to know just how far they will go."

"You have no concern about anything else?"

"Meaning what?"

"In your boots, senor, I would worry about how much of a fight your enemies would put up before even considering asking for help from either lawmen or Army. They will put up a fight, you know."

McVey touched the still unhealed gash at the side of his head. "I've already found out that they'll put up a fight," he said. "And that they'll fight dirty. I was out at the Crown Ranch yesterday, but not with my eighteen riders. I made the mistake of going there alone except for two men."

HERNANDEZ OTERA regarded him with a sharpened interest. "The Crown Ranch is owned by John Bristow," he said. "I know Major Bristow. I did not know that he would buy cattle from the *comancheros.*"

"His man Brazos said that the cattle were bought from Juan Trujillo."

"Ah—Trujillo!"

"You know him, too?"

"I know him. As who does not?"

McVey said, "First the Crown outfit, then Trujillo. Where can this *comanchero* be found?"

"The chances are, Senor McVey, that he will find you," Otera said. "He will reason that your activities will make ranchers

like Major John Bristow reluctant to do business with him, and he will almost certainly decide to do something about you. But if he does not find you, you can find him easily enough. Trujillo is a *ranchero* himself. His range is south of the Crown Ranch. Too, he is often at a small village near the Crown—San Alejandro."

McVey nodded, reached for his hat. "Thanks," he said. "How much do I owe you, Senor Otera?"

Otera shook his head. "There is no fee to be paid," he said. "For advice, yes. For information, no. Besides, I enjoyed talking with you. Most of my legal work has to do with small people with small problems. It is a pleasure to meet a big man with a big problem." He rose and held out his hand. "When I was a youth," he said, smiling, "I daydreamed of being a man of action. But all my adult life I have been tied to a desk. So I admire men like you, *amigo*. I wish you luck."

"Thanks again," McVey said, gripping his hand.

It was then that the shot crashed, just outside the house.

CHAPTER IV

Crown Ranch

OVER Otera's pudgy face spread a startled look, but McVey merely swore under his breath and leaped for the door. Jerking the door open, he ran across the gallery and into the patio. He drew his gun, called, "Tom—Tom!"

A vast relief swept through him as Tom Shannon answered. The man appeared at the gateway in the high adobe wall, shoving another man ahead of him. McVey came to a halt, stared at Shannon's prisoner. It was the Mexican who had followed them to Las Vegas.

"I jumped him, but he's a fast hombre with a gun," Shannon said. "He took a shot at me before I could get hold of him. But he's harmless now."

Lawyer Otera came across the patio carrying a lamp. In the glow of the lamp, McVey sized up the *vaquero*. He was a wiry little man, swarthy of skin, his face pitted with pock-marks. He stared back at McVey, his black eyes sullen but unafraid.

"What is it?" Otera asked. "What happened?"

"This is Tom Shannon, one of my men," McVey replied. "This other hombre has been following us like a shadow all day. He's a Crown hand and—"

"No," Otera interrupted, "you are wrong. I know this man. He is a rider for the *comanchero*, Juan Trujillo."

McVey frowned worriedly. If the *comancheros* were this alert, this much on guard, he and his men were apt to be in for a rough time. He said, "Ask him why he's been spying on us."

The lawyer questioned the *vaquero* in Spanish, and for a time words flew back and forth between them. Finally Otera said, in English, "He knows nothing. He was given orders to watch you—where you go, what you do. He was to report to his *patron*, Trujillo, tomorrow."

"Well, let him report, and be damned," McVey said sourly. "Turn him loose, Tom."

Shannon turned the *vaquero* toward the getaway, gave him a shove through it. The man was propelled forward off-balance. When he recovered, they heard him cursing bitterly in Spanish. There was a drumming of hoofs as he rode away. The three men remained silent, listening to the hoof-beats fade in the distance.

Then Hernandez Otera said to McVey, "*Amigo*, I would not fill your boots"—his voice was grave—"not for all the cattle in New Mexico . . . ."

They rode deeper into the land that was hostile to Texans, Jeff McVey and his eighteen men. They traveled fast, burdened only by three spare horses under pack. When they crossed a mountain range they sighted the village of San Alejandro in a bend of the foothills, a cluster

of dried-mud blocks a mile away. They dropped down upon the vast sweep of range that was the Crown Ranch.

There they crossed the sea of grass, passing scattered bunches of cattle and once sighting a band of loose horses. They saw no riders for mile after mile, but finally topped a prairie swell and saw the ranch headquarters ahead of them.

It stood in a broad hollow through which ran a shallow creek fringed by cottonwoods, the sizable headquarters of a sizable cow outfit, with buildings of adobe. Across the creek, McVey saw, some attempt was being made at farming. There was a tilled field that appeared to be a vegetable garden, and two men were busy there with hoes. Beyond was a small orchard, the trees planted in neat rows, but still too small to bear fruit.

McVey said, "Tom, keep the others in hand. I don't want any trouble unless these people start it."

Shannon, always a miser with words, merely nodded.

They rode into the Crown ranchyard at a walk, in pairs. A man working in a blacksmith shed paused with tongs in one hand and hammer in the other to stare at them. He watched them warily, but neither challenged them nor called a warning to anybody else who might be about the place.

McVey saw no one else for a moment, then a man appeared on the arcaded gallery of the sprawling ranchhouse. McVey signaled to his men to wait there in the middle of the yard, and turned his own horse toward the house.

He reined in directly before the man, folded his hands on his saddle-horn. "You're Major Bristow, owner of this ranch?"

"I am. And you're McVey, I suppose."

"So you've heard of me, have you?"

Bristow nodded. He was a man of nearly fifty, McVey judged. There was gray at his temples, and he had a neatly trimmed mustache. He was rather a handsome man, fit looking, of little more than medium height and of slender build. He wore a brown tweed coat, tan whipcord breeches, and military-type boots. With such clothes and so nicely groomed, he looked to Jeff McVey like one of those Eastern sportsmen who were forever appearing in the cattle country these days.

BRISTOW said, "Yes, I've heard about you, McVey. From my ward, Miss Fenton. And from my range boss, Brazos Addams."

"Then you know why I'm here," McVey said roughly. "I'm not going to fool around, Bristow. You've got cattle in my JM-Connected brand. I want them."

"And you're prepared to take them by force, is that it?"

"If need be."

"There'll be no need for that," Bristow said, smiling wryly. "As you see, you've got me here alone. My crew is down on the south range, and things will be all your way when they ride in." He took out a cheroot, lighted it. "I don't want bloodshed, McVey. If you're a sensible man, you don't want any. I'll make you an offer. Brazos gave me a tally of the number of JM-Connected cattle that were in that herd we branded the other day. Two hundred and ten head. They're scattered across Crown range now, and it'll take some time to gather them. So I'll pay you twenty dollars a head for them. Take the money and give me a bill-of-sale. Or if you'd rather have the stock, I'll have my crew make the gather tomorrow."

McVey eyed the man with some surprise. If Bristow was willing to pay cash for the cattle, and twenty dollars a head was not an unfair price, it was evidence that he wanted no trouble. On the other hand, it was a cheap way to wriggle out of a nasty situation. Major John Bristow was in the uncomfortable position, after all, of being caught with stolen property in his possession.

McVey took out makings, and while he was rolling a cigarette, he became aware of a rider coming into the yard. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that it was the girl, Jan. She looked about worriedly at the riders filling the yard, then swung her pinto over to the house and

reined in near McVey. She was wearing a dark green blouse with her riding skirt today, and her neck scarf was white silk. A broad-brimmed, flat-crowned hat hung at her shoulders by its chin-strap.

To McVey, letting his gaze linger on her, she seemed far more wonderful than when he had first seen her. He touched his hat to her, and she nodded briefly in reply, then looked anxiously at Bristow.

"John—"

"It's all right, Janice," Bristow said, smiling at her. "There's nothing to be alarmed about. Mr. McVey and I can settle our differences amicably."

She looked back at McVey, and at McVey's riders, and she didn't seem too sure that there was nothing to be alarmed about. McVey, lighting his cigarette, wondered about her and Bristow. His ward, the man had said. Whatever that meant. She was in his care, for some reason. If he had told the strict truth. His ward, and he her guardian.

But there has been something in his smile for her and in his voice when speaking to her that suggested a more intimate relationship. McVey felt an odd annoyance. But then, he reflected, he had told himself before that she must belong to some man.

He said, "I'll accept payment for my cattle, Bristow. But I don't know that I should accept Brazos' tally. Or what you say is his tally. There could have been more than two hundred and ten of my cattle in that herd."

Bristow's face stiffened. "I don't like your questioning my word, McVey," he said flatly. "After all, I know you can make your own tally. So why should I lie when there is a chance that I could be proved a liar?"

And Janice said sharply, "Can't you trust anyone, McVey?"

He looked at her with a faint smile. "I can't trust any man who has stolen property in his possession," he told her. "In my place, you wouldn't, either." He looked back at Bristow, and the stiff look of anger was still on the man's face. "You've a point there, friend," the Texan said. "I could make a tally—if I wanted to take the time. Instead, I'll take a chance that you're giving it to me straight."

"Suit yourself, McVey," Bristow said. "But get this straight. I bought that herd from my neighbor, Juan Trujillo, and I had no knowledge that there were stolen cattle in it. Most of the stock was in Trujillo's brand and—"

"You knew that he's a *comanchero,* didn't you?"

"I didn't know it. I don't listen to gossip."

"Gossip? Hell, Bristow! Trujillo is known as a *comanchero* from here to the San Saba River. You'd better quit trusting your neighbors so much, before one of your deals with them gets you into real trouble. I've heard of men getting strung up for being found with stolen stock in their possession." He took a final drag on his cigarette, then flung it to the ground. "All right, Bristow. Pay up, and I'll clear off your range."

THE Crown owner nodded jerkily. "Come inside, will you?" he said, and turned abruptly into the house.

McVey dismounted, crossed the gallery, and entered the cool, dim hallway beyond the door. He saw Bristow turning into a room to the left of the hallway. He was aware, too, that a woman stood in the doorway of a room to the opposite side of the hall, and gave her a searching glance. She was older than Jan Fenton, much older; in her thirties, McVey judged.

She was attractive in a subdued fashion, and there was a fine maturity of figure about her. Her gaze met McVey's coolly, but there was a troubled look in her eyes. He removed his hat and bowed, but she neither spoke nor smiled. He had turned toward the room which Bristow had entered then swung around as the woman said tensely, "Mr. McVey—"

"Yes?"

"Don't come here again. You were lucky this time, but another time—"

She broke off abruptly, looking beyond McVey with something close to fear in her eyes. He swung about, saw Bristow

watching them with an angry expression.

Bristow said harshly, "Don't concern yourself with this, Louise. Mr. McVey will leave in a moment, and there will be no reason for him to return." He shifted his angry gaze to McVey. "You'll have to excuse my sister's behavior. This business has upset her. Come in here, will you?"

CHAPTER V

Your Pride—or Your Life?

IT WAS a study, much like the one in Lawyer Otera's house. Books and comfortable furniture, and on the wall a framed painting of John Bristow in the uniform of the United States Army.

Bristow, standing behind his desk, saw McVey looking at the picture and said, "That was done by one of my fellow officers, McVey. A very talented young man. He had me pose for him shortly before we were mustered out after the war. I served in the artillery."

McVey nodded, looking at him, thinking that here was a man of great conceit. He could imagine that as a major of artillery John Bristow had been something of a martinet. Bristow was eyeing him curiously.

"You served in a Texas outfit, I suppose?"

McVey nodded. "I was a Johnny Reb."

"Well, the war is over now."

McVey thought of the hard times in Texas, in all the South, the hard times brought on by defeat, and he wasn't sure that the war was wholly over—not so long as there were carpetbaggers and garrisons of Union troops all through the crushed Confederacy. He said, "The money, Bristow."

"Of course," said Bristow, and went to a cabinet at one side of the room.

He unlocked the cabinet, took out a large metal box, set the box on the table and unlocked it with a small key. When the lid of the box was opened, McVey saw a large amount of money in gold coin and paper currency.

Bristow said, "As I figure it, two hundred and ten head at twenty dollars a head amounts to four thousand two hundred dollars." He smiled thinly. "This is the first time in my life, McVey, that I ever paid for the same cattle twice."

McVey made no reply to that.

Bristow began counting out the money.

When McVey accepted the cash and walked out, he saw nothing of Bristow's sister, and upon stepping from the house he found that Janice Fenton, too, had disappeared. He mounted his horse, called to his men, "All right! Let's get out of here!"

Bristow came out to the gallery, and said, "I hope you have as much luck at your next stop, McVey. You already know where to find the rest of your cattle, I suppose."

"No. But I'll find them."

"How? If I may ask."

"There's always Trujillo," McVey said. "If he hasn't got the rest of my cattle, he'll know where they are."

He caught Bristow's amused smile as he turned away, and he didn't like it at all. He didn't trust the man. But that hardly mattered, for he wouldn't be returning to the Crown Ranch. In one way he regretted that he had no reason to return. Because of the girl. A memory of a woman was no good to a man, especially of a woman he hadn't really known.

The Texans rode southwest from the Crown headquarters, McVey and Shannon again at the head of the band. They hadn't traveled far when they saw three riders heading toward the ranch headquarters. One was a *vaquero*. One was the brawler, Brock. The other was old Brazos Addams.

The three Crown men reined in, watched the Texans come on. Old Brazos gigged his horse forward to intercept them, putting a grin on his shaggily bearded face. "So you did come back, eh, McVey?"

McVey reined in facing him, and returned Brazos's grin with one of his own. "Didn't you expect me, you old rannihan?" he asked. "Did you think Brock's laying me out with a branding-iron would keep me from coming back?"

"No. I figured you'd be back. I told the Major to expect you."

"And he wouldn't take your word for it?"

"He took my word for it. On the Crown, what old Brazos says is heeded."

"Then how come he didn't have a trap ready?"

Brazos shrugged his thick shoulders. "He's not like that, McVey," he said, something apologetic in his manner. "He don't like trouble. Live and let live, the Major says. He just won't take my word for that one thing—that the cattle business is a dirty game of dog eat dog." He paused, spat, then went on quickly, "But don't get the notion the man is soft, McVey. He's not. He can be rawhide tough and wolf-mean if you cross him up. Did you take money for your cattle?"

"Yeah. Tell me something, Brazos. Give it to me straight, now that it no longer matters. How many JM-Connected cattle did you tally?"

"Two hundred and ten. That's Gospel true, McVey."

McVEY STUDIED the bearlike old man, and believed him. "All right," he said. "I'm satisfied. I'm leaving Crown range, and I won't be back—unless you hombres follow me and make trouble.—What's the shortest way to Juan Trujillo's headquarters, Brazos?"

"Due south through the rock hills, if you know the country," Brazos said. "But for strangers—well, you'd better go by way of San Alejandro. Swing south from the village. That way you won't run the risk of getting lost in the hills." He eyed McVey narrowly, then spat tobacco juice again and said, "You've got guts, amigo. I like a man who won't admit he's licked. So I'm going to give you some advice. Stay away from Trujillo."

"I should let him scare me, when I've got eighteen good men siding me?"

"Trujillo can have ten times that many siding him."

"He's that big a hombre, eh?"

Brazos nodded. "And I'm not just trying to scare you, McVey," he said, lifting his reins. "Trujillo is plenty bad medicine. The thing for you to decide is whether your pride is more important to you than your life. Yeah."

He turned his horse away.

And McVey, looking after him, experienced a sudden weakening of his resolve. If a boot-tough old rannihan like Brazos Addams felt that Juan Trujillo was a man to fear—

McVey shook his head, and muttered, "To hell with that!"

He rode on toward San Alejandro, and the *comanchero's* headquarters.

It was hazy dusk when the Texans reached San Alejandro. McVey picked a camp site a short distance outside the village. They off-saddled their horses, a couple of the men unpacked the grub and cooking utensils, while Pete Macklin got his cookfire started. They ate their usual fare of beans, bacon, biscuits, coffee.

After the meal, the men were restless. There was a *cantina* in San Alejandro, and the knowledge gave most of the crew a sudden thirst.

McVey understood how it was, and said, "All right, boys. Go have a few drinks. But don't go too heavy on the *tequila*. We're riding at sunup."

They went off noisily, all but Tom Shannon who sat by the fire smoking his pipe, and Pete Macklin who had to clean up the supper things. McVey took a turn about the camp, making sure the horses were secure in their rope corral, looking toward the village and seeing its few lighted windows, and hearing the rowdy voices of his Texas men.

The night was sooty dark, with few stars and the moon was smudged over by clouds. There was uneasiness in Jeff McVey. His nerves felt knotted. It was because of what Brazos had said to him, of course. The old rannihan *had* thrown a scare into him. He told himself that Tru-

jillo couldn't be as bad as Brazos said—and tried to believe it.

He returned to the fire, hunkered down, rolled a smoke. Tom Shannon stared broodily into the blaze, a man lonely and lost. Pete Macklin finished with his pots and pans, and said, "Boss, I'll mosey over there and get me a wee nip."

McVey said, "All right, Pete," and the cook went limping off through the darkness.

Macklin wasn't many minutes gone when there was a commotion in the village, angry voices shouting. McVey rose. "Sounds like those buckaroos have got into trouble already." But the racket died out almost at once, and he relaxed.

But Tom Shannon said, "Jeff, I don't like that. They're too quiet."

McVey nodded. "I'll go see what's going on."

As he turned toward the village, he saw somebody hurrying toward him. He recognized Pete Macklin by his limp.

"Pete, what's up?"

"There's hell to pay!" Macklin panted, out of breath and puffing. "The boys stepped into a trap! I would have, too, only I came along the side of the *cantina* instead of going right to the front. I saw what was happening, through a window." The cook swore bitterly. "It was all rigged ahead. Our crowd was jumped soon as they got inside and started to drink. A big bunch of Mexes have them covered, Jeff. They're taking the guns off our boys!"

McVey muttered an oath, started past Macklin. But Macklin grabbed his arm, held him. "Don't go there!" he cried wildly. "You—"

McVey broke away from him, started running.

REACHING a barn at the edge of the village, he shrank into its shadows. San Alejandro was larger than it appeared to be from a distance, and McVey, looking for the *cantina,* saw several fair-sized

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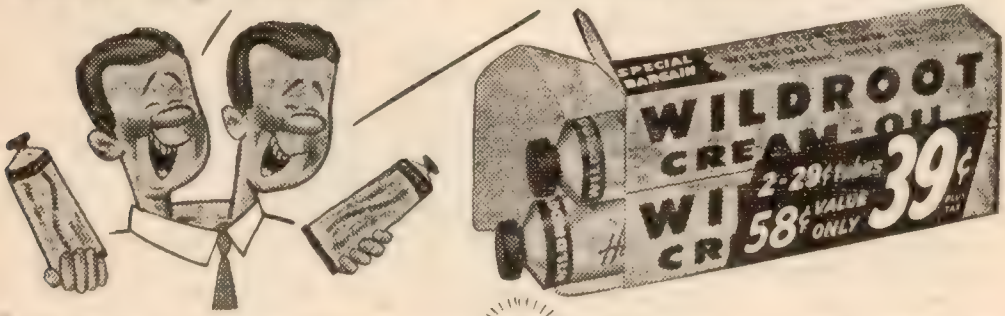

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buildings that evidently housed some sort of business. They were located in the center of the village, about the plaza. McVey located the *cantina* among them.

A crowd of people had gathered in front of the place, and now McVey saw a big bunch of horsemen appear in the plaza. They were all native New Mexicans. They milled about wildly, talked and shouted excitedly in Spanish.

McVey reluctantly faced the hard truth that there was nothing he could do against such odds, and the realization angered him. For a moment he considered going to join his men, as a prisoner, and sharing whatever they must face.

Then he knew that would be foolhardy. It was he these Mexicans—Trujillo's men, certainly—wanted to take prisoner. The chances were that his men would not be harmed, but he would certainly be killed if taken. McVey turned away from the barn, then a thought came to him. He went inside.

There were two horses in the barn, and McVey quickly slipped their halters and backed them from their stalls. In one corner was a pile of straw, he saw as he struck a match. He crossed to it, dropped the match into the straw. As he drove the two horses from the barn, the straw was already blazing.

He left the barn at a run, heading toward his camp.

Pete Macklin was frantically saddling a horse when McVey got there, and Tom Shannon was at the rope corral dropping his loop on McVey's gray gelding. Shannon's sorrel stood saddled. McVey found his saddle, picked it up.

There was an even louder shouting from the village now; the fire had been discovered. McVey could see the flames leaping high from the *viga* roof. He saw crazily moving figures against the glare of the blaze. With luck, he told himself, the fire would keep the Trujillo crowd interested until he and Shannon and Macklin made their getaway.

Shannon led the gray from the corral, and McVey put the saddle blanket onto its back and heaved the saddle into place. Shannon bridled the animals, and removed his catch-rope. Pete Macklin had his horse saddled by now, and swung onto its back. He rode out at once, not heeding McVey's shout, "Wait, Pete!" The fleeing man vanished through the darkness, riding hard.

There was a drumming of hoofs as McVey and Shannon mounted. They looked toward the village and saw horsemen galloping past the flame-swept barn. The two Texans turned as one, headed north, lifting their horses to a hard lope. Their pursuers sighted them, and savage shouts rose. Guns began to racket, and in the first flurry of shots McVey heard a gasp escape Tom Shannon.

"Tom, you hit?"

"Yeah."

"Bad?"

"Bad enough," Shannon replied, and his voice was tortured. He was slumping forward in the saddle, and his horse was faltering. "Keep going, Jeff," he said thickly. "Don't bother about me!"

CHAPTER VI

Brazos' Warning

McVEY SWORE and reached for his rifle, pulling his gray to a rearing halt. When the animal came down, McVey reined about and swung the rifle to his shoulder.

It was one of the few repeating rifles yet to be seen on the frontier, a short-barreled Henry firing half-ounce slugs and having fifteen spare cartridges in an under-barrel tube. The man who had sold it to McVey, in San Antonio, had claimed that it fitted a man's arms like a sweetheart, and McVey had found that to be true. He opened fire at the oncoming riders, a dozen horsemen, and kept shooting as fast as he could jack fresh loads into the chamber and work hammer and trigger.

There was savagery in the fast shooting of the rifle, and McVey, not aiming to hit but shooting to put fear in the Mexicans, sensed the panic that gripped the bunch of riders. Their guns fell silent, and they pulled their horses to rearing halts and milled about.

Firing into the bunch, McVey had to hit something even without aiming. He saw one rider pitch from his spooked horse, and another reel in the saddle. They had never come up against a gun like the Henry, and by the time McVey got in a dozen shots, their panic was complete. They turned and fled, and McVey stopped shooting.

He quieted the gray, which was acting up, badly spooked, then reloaded the rifle with cartridges from his saddle-bag. He listened to the drumming of hoofs, making sure that the manhunters were returning to San Alejandro. He could hear the groaning of one of the riders he had downed.

He turned to follow Tom Shannon finally, and soon came upon him.

Shannon had dropped from his horse, and lay sprawled unconscious on the ground. McVey dismounted, knelt beside him. Shannon's wound was in the left side, and was bleeding steadily. McVey waited, even though a voice in his mind screamed at him to get back onto his horse and ride—ride hard.

He removed the scarf from around Shannon's neck, folded it into a pad which he placed inside Shannon's shirt against the wound. The man stirred finally, and said huskily, "Jeff?"

"Yeah, Tom."

"Get going, man. I told you not to bother about me."

"It's all right now. I drove them off."

"They'll come back," Shannon said.

McVey knew that was so, and he knew that they wouldn't be scared off a second time. They wouldn't rush him, because of their fear of his repeating rifle. They would try other tactics, and get him in the end. But he had run out on the rest of his crew, if reluctantly, and he wouldn't do that to Tom Shannon.

He said, "I'm putting you back on your horse, Tom. I'm going to tie you to the saddle. We'll get to Fort Bascom, somehow—and, by damn, the Army will have to give us protection."

Shannon didn't protest again, and with McVey lifting him, he got to his feet. McVey got him onto the sorrel, then took the lariat off its saddle and tied the wounded man's wrist to the horn. He mounted the gray, then caught up the reins of Shannon's sorrel and started out, intending to go through the mountains toward Bascom. He held the horses to a walk, because of Shannon's condition. Shannon was unconscious again, doubled over and lying against the sorrel's neck.

McVey had traveled no more than a mile when he heard riders coming along behind him. He knew then that he would never make it to Fort Bascom. His pursuers would expect him to head for there, and some of them would cut in ahead to ambush him while others tried to overtake him.

Despair gripped him, but then he saw a way out.

He turned abruptly west. He forded a shallow stream, and halted in a brush thicket on its west side. He waited there, listening to the rhythmic beat of many horses off in the night. When the sound of the manhunters faded in the distance, McVey set out again.

For the one place the Trujillo crowd wouldn't expect him to seek sanctuary.

The Crown Ranch.

IT WAS FAR past midnight when McVey reached Crown headquarters. The buildings were dark, but he swung over to the one he took to be the bunkhouse. And shouted, "Brazos!"

The reply came from a small adobe house farther away. It was Brazos, calling from its doorway, "Who's there? What do you want, hombre?"

McVey didn't answer, but turned his horses toward the small adobe. Reining in, facing the old man who had pulled on his pants over his flannels, McVey said, "I've got a wounded man here, Brazos. He's

bad hurt. I'm asking you take him in."

"Listen, McVey—I don't own this place. I'm only—"

McVey didn't listen to the rest of his harangue. He dismounted, went to the unconscious Tom Shannon and untied him. He pulled the man's limp body from the saddle, taking it over his shoulder. He carried Shannon to the doorway of Brazos' house, and the range boss backed inside to make way for him.

"Strike a light," McVey ordered.

Brazos swore and moved about the room, finally striking a match and lighting a lamp on the table. It was a one-room house, roughly furnished and with but a single bunk. McVey held Shannon, bracing himself under the weight.

"Make a bed for him in a corner, Brazos."

"Hell, man," Brazos growled, "put him in my bunk."

McVey lay Shannon on the bunk, and was elbowed roughly aside by the old man. Brazos opened Shannon's shirt, removed the neck scarf pad, and examined the wound. It was ugly; badly torn flesh over the ribs. There were almost certainly cracked ribs. Brazos said, "He's lost a lot of blood, but it's not too bad."

He moved away, added kindling to the embers in the fireplace. Then he picked up a wooden pail and went outside for water. Returning, he poured the water into a kettle hanging over the fire. The kindling was beginning to blaze, and Brazos added a few more sticks. He opened a cupboard, took down a bottle of carbolic acid and a bottle of whiskey, placing the bottles on the table.

"Have a drink, McVey," he invited. "You look a little peaked." He grinned through his beard. "Take your choice."

McVey said sourly. "Mighty funny," and picked up the whisky bottle. He took a long pull on it, then took out makings and rolled a smoke.

"We rode into a trap," he said. "At San Alejandro. You were right about Trujillo having plenty of riders at his beck and call."

"You didn't lose all your men but this one, did you?"

"I lost them. My cook got away, but all the rest were taken prisoner."

"Trujillo will send them back to Texas," Brazos said. "It's you he wants—dead." He eyed McVey curiously. "What gave you the notion to come back here?"

"It's the only safe place I could think of."

"Don't be too sure it's safe, *amigo*."

McVey puffed on his brown-paper cigarette, smiled humorlessly. "I know blamed well it's not safe," he said. "How'd the Trujillo crowd find out that I was headed toward San Alejandro, Brazos? Did a Crown rider take the news to him?" He saw the range boss scowl. "And will one go to tell him that I'm here now? Don't bother to send one out, Brazos. I'm leaving, as soon as we've doctored up Shannon."

"Going where?" Brazos asked. "When half the country is gunning for you?"

"I don't know yet."

"You'll never get through to Texas. Every trail and road will be watched."

McVey nodded. "I know that," he said. "Maybe I'm not going back to Texas. I'll stick around the Territory until Shannon is able to ride. And you'd better see to it, Brazos, that he gets good care and is kept safe. If he gets turned over to Trujillo, I'll come gunning for the man who—"

Brazos looked beyond him, a queer expression on his face.

McVey spun around, and saw Janice Fenton in the doorway.

McVey felt the quick sharpening of his senses. She seemed more desirable each time he saw her. Perhaps now it was because of the way she was dressed. She was wearing bedroom slippers and a green silken robe over her nightdress. Her hair was somewhat tousled as if, McVey imagined, she had come straight from bed.

SHE LOOKED past McVey to the man on the bunk. "What has happened?" she asked. "Brazos, what's wrong with that man?"

Brazos' voice had disapproval in it.

"Never mind," he told her. "Get back to the house, girl. What do you mean, anyway, coming here?"

"I haven't been asleep," she said vaguely. "I heard horses, heard someone shout." She looked at McVey, frowning. "I knew it was you. I knew you'd cause more trouble. You shouldn't have come here. Don't you realize that?"

He nodded. "I'm leaving shortly," he told her. "As soon as my friend is patched up."

She turned to Brazos. "Is there anything I can do?"

The old man snorted. "You can get back to the house—pronto," he said. "Before the Major finds out you're here. Get going!"

He crossed the room, started to close the door on her. She was forced to leave, and when she was gone and the door was closed, Brazos Addams began cursing.

"A girl like that—trouble," he growled. "I never saw it to fail. A good-looking woman always means trouble." He went to the fireplace, found that the water in the kettle was hot. "All right, McVey," he said sourly, "we'll patch him up. Then you can clear out."

Brazos cleansed the wound, and asked McVey's help only to hold Shannon in a sitting position while he wrapped him with a heavy bandage to make a support so there would be no strain on the fractured ribs. Shannon had regained consciousness, but he passed out again when forced to sit up. He was suffering from shock as well as being weakened by loss of blood.

When the doctoring was completed and Shannon came to again, Brazos told McVey to give him a short shot of whisky. It wasn't long then before the wounded man slept.

Talking Devil-Boxes

THE fact that telephones could speak the Cherokee Indian tongue as well as English was the deciding factor which permitted the instrument to be used in Oklahoma as early as 1886. And it took a young Cherokee, scarcely more than a lad, to introduce the talking Devil-boxes.

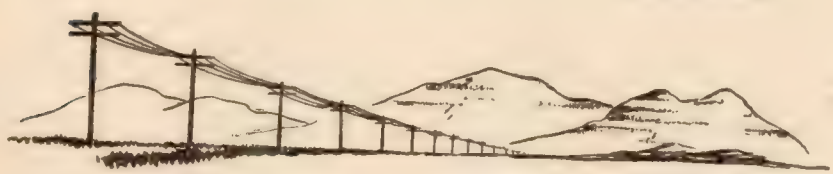
Although the records are confused as to his tribal name, the young Indian who brought those first phones to Oklahoma later was known as E. D. Hicks. When only twenty years old Hicks formed a company to run a thirty-five mile line from Muskogee to Tahlequah, the capital of the Cherokee Nation. The United States Indian agency office was at Muskogee.

When the Cherokee National Council was in session as many as two couriers a day rode between the two places. Young Hicks, who had taken to the White Man's education and progress with alacrity, believed a phone line would overcome the slow courier method of transmitting messages.

An official permit from the tribal elders was needed by Hicks to string his line. They opposed the White Man's infernal talking-machine with long and loud oratory. In desperation Hicks set up two instruments to prove their harmlessness. Two bold young bucks consented to listen at the ends of a short demonstration wire. They nearly fell over in stark amazement when they discovered the Devil-boxes could speak Cherokee. Hicks got his permit.

However, when the line was completed Hicks reverted to the peculiar Indian sense of humor, and also reaped his revenge. In contrast to the first message of the inventor Morse over the telegraph,—"What hath God wrought?", young Hicks frightened the wits out of the waiting Indian at the other end of the new line by saying, "I am the Devil. I am coming after you."

—*J. R. Young*



Brazos washed his hands, and said, "Not much of a wound. No danger at all unless, of course, there's infection. I'll see that he's taken care of, and I'll fix it with Major Bristow so he can stay here until his ribs knit." He wiped his hands on a flour-sack towel. "You've got money, haven't you, McVey?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I'll sell you a spare horse, for a pack animal. And some grub from the cook-shack. A skillet and a coffee pot."

McVey eyed him with surprise. "All right," he said. "Thanks."

Brazos gestured toward the cupboard beside the fireplace. "I keep a pot there and some coffee," he said. "You may as well get some on the fire while I'm gone. There's water in the pail."

He picked up his boots, sat on the bench by the table to put them on, then left the 'dobe. McVey fixed the coffee, set the pot on the fire, and the brew was ready to drink by the time Brazos returned. McVey got a couple tin-cups from the cupboard and filled them.

They sat down at the table, Brazos saying, "Your pack-horse is outside with your gray. Grub, an ax, matches, tobacco. Leave fifty dollars with me, and I'll square it with the Major."

McVey reached inside his shirt, took the fifty dollars from his money-belt. "What's Bristow going to say about this, Brazos?"

Brazos shrugged. "It's not what he says, but how he looks at a man," he said. "He can strip the hide off you, just with a look. He's no talker, the Major." He drank some coffee. "He's a deep one. Hard to know what he's really like. But don't worry that this will get me into a tight. Bristow can't run this place himself. And he's got nobody to take my place, not right off anyway."

"How long has he owned the Crown Rranch?"

"He bought it from the Monteros family back in 'Fifty-five. It was a part of an old Spanish land grant. He put me out here to run the outfit with a bunch of *vaqueros,* while he operated a big store in Santa Fe. He moved out here seven-eight years ago. That was after his wife died."

"What happened to his store?"

"He still owns it. Has a man running it for him. But he spends a part of his time there. Yeah, he's in Santa Fe a lot of the time."

"The store wouldn't be supplying the *comancheros* with trade goods?"

Brazos frowned. "Don't try to pump me about that, McVey," he said. "If the Major supplies the *comancheros,* I don't know it—and wouldn't tell you so, if I did.

"Get this straight. I've taken a fancy to you because you've got guts. But I'm loyal to the man who pays my wages. So don't try to make trouble, or you'll get it back with interest from me."

McVEY LAUGHED. "All right, Brazos." He drank his coffee, then rolled and lighted a smoke. "How about the girl? She's not Bristow's daughter, is she?"

Brazos was still frowning. "Don't pump me about her, either," he said harshly. "And don't get any notions about her, if you know what's good for you."

"How can a man help it?"

"Never mind. Just keep her out of your mind."

"All right," McVey said, rising and reaching for his hat. "Have it your way, Brazos. Thanks for everything—including the warnings. I'll be back in a week or ten days to see if Shannon is ready to travel."

"If you're still alive, you mean."

"Yeah," said McVey, and walked from the 'dobe.

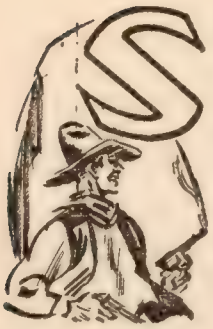
He swung to the gray's saddle, caught up the reins of the dun horse under pack. Brazos came to the doorway, and said, "Head west, McVey. Go into the hills. Hole up, and keep your eyes open. Trujillo will have this whole range fine-combed for you."

McVey nodded, said, "S'long," and turned away.

Brazos said, "Luck," and seemed to mean it.

CHAPTER VII

Unexpected Rendezvous



SOMETHING like an hour's ride brought McVey to the hills. He rode through the dark uplifts for perhaps another half-hour and then, coming upon a small creek, halted and made camp. He staked the horses out, then removed the bedroll from his saddle.

He fell asleep almost at once, but it was a restless sleep and he was glad to wake and find the pink of dawn in the sky. He'd been troubled by nightmares, for the first time since the war.

He gathered brush, built a fire, and rustled up breakfast. As soon as he'd eaten he kicked dirt onto the fire, not wanting the smoke from it to give away his whereabouts to anyone who might be riding the hills.

Looking about the site he had picked for his camp, he decided that it would do for a time. He had found his way into a small valley; there was water, grass, and a dense brush thicket. There was timber on the surrounding slopes. He had come into the valley from the east and there appeared to be an easy way from it to the west. Too, the slopes could be easily climbed by his horse, if he had reason to escape in a hurry.

He spent some time cleaning his Colt revolver and the Henry rifle, then at mid-morning climbed the east slope. Reaching the crest, he looked out across the Crown range. He saw small bunches of cattle, but no riders. And from there he could not see the ranch headquarters.

He had a smoke while up there, as restlessness again began to build up in him. He was becoming aware of the fact that he would find hiding-out difficult. He was a man who needed to keep busy.

It was then that he was seized by the idea of going after Juan Trujillo, telling himself that he might be able to get to the man if he played his cards right. The idea came of the memory of last night's defeat at Trujillo's hands. Suddenly he wanted to come face to face with the *comanchero*—the two of them alone, with guns in their hands. If he killed Trujillo, there would be no need for him to hide out like an outlaw on the dodge. So he made his decision. He would get to Trujillo, somehow.

Just when he was about to return to camp, he sighted a rider. A single rider, traveling at an easy lope and heading directly toward him.

McVey made sure there was only one, scanning the range in every direction. He relaxed somewhat when he was convinced that this wasn't trouble. Then shortly he grunted with astonishment. He recognized the horse—the pinto pony. And the rider was Janice Fenton!

She turned south, passing the narrow entrance to the valley in which his camp was located, and soon was lost to McVey's sight. Curiosity gripped him, and he returned to camp and saddled the gray. Riding across the valley, he quartered up the slope of the nearest hill to the south, until after perhaps an hour he reached the top of a timbered ridge that overlooked a sizable mountain lake. The water, mirror-smooth, reflected the blue sky and its white clouds. The girl was riding slowly along the edge of the lake.

She reined in, dismounted, and climbed some huge rocks that jutted out into the water. There she seated herself, her back to a boulder, and gazed out over the lake. McVey waited, smoking a cigarette, inclined to think that she was waiting for someone. The idea passed after a time, for she remained so still. McVey was sure she would be restless if she were waiting for a man. He deadened his cigarette against the sole of his boot, flung it away, and started down from the ridge.

It took him at least a quarter-hour to reach the lake, and a few minutes longer to ride along its edge to the rocks. In all that time, so far as he could tell, Janice didn't move. She didn't even look around

as he came up to where her pinto stood ground-hitched. But when he called, "Hello, there!" she started violently.

She looked around, then scrambled to her feet as she recognized him. She was frightened, and showed it. McVey supposed she had a right to be afraid of him. In his rough, hard-worn range clothes and with a stubble of beard on his face, he looked tough and disreputable. And any sensible woman would certainly feel some uneasiness at encountering a hard-looking man in such a lonely place. He smiled, though, and when McVey smiled he lost much of his rough appearance.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to scare you."

She said nothing.

"Brazos didn't tell you I was up here in the hills?"

"No."

"How is my friend this morning?"

"Brazos said that he is much better."

"Major Bristow wasn't sore about his being at Crown?"

HER EXPRESSION changed, became annoyed. "Major Bristow isn't heartless, McVey," he said. "No matter what you think of him, he isn't cruel." She seemed to think that Bristow needed defending. "You have no reason to find fault with him. He treated you fairly, didn't he?"

He nodded, and said, with some reservation, "I suppose he did." As he dismounted and walked toward the rocks, her frightened look returned. She couldn't come down from the rocks except by coming directly toward him; he had cut her off from her pony. She looked as though she wanted to run.

McVey halted ten feet from her, smiled again, and said, "Stop being scared. I'm not going to touch you." To let her see his hands busy, he took out tobacco sack and papers. As he was busy with his makings, he said, "I'm not as bad as I look, Janice."

She still looked as though she wanted to run.

He studied her, and suddenly he knew that her fear was deep-rooted. It was a part of her, and it wasn't just fear of him. He didn't understand it. There seemed to be no need for a girl like her, living at such a place as the Crown Rranch, to be haunted by fear. He rolled his cigarette and lighted it, then leaned against a boulder and smoked thoughtfully.

"What's the trouble, Janice?" he asked. "What are you afraid of?"

"I—I'm not afraid of anything."

"You are, deep inside. And my coming here made you aware of it."

She flushed, and bit her lip. Suddenly she looked very young, more like a child than a woman in the first flush of maturity. She said, not looking at him, "No one ever noticed it before. And I—I never told anyone. But I am afraid so much of the time. I try not to be. But I can't help it." She forced a smile. "I suppose that seems foolish to you."

McVey shook his head. "But it seems odd that nobody else has noticed it," he told her. "Major Bristow, his sister, or old Brazos."

"There was one person who knew," Janice said. "Mrs. Bristow. Martha understood. When I was a child I would have nightmares and wake up screaming. She would come to my room, and try to tell me that it was all right, that nothing could harm me."

"And now she is dead?"

"Yes. And I miss her."

"The Major's sister doesn't take her place, eh?"

"No one could take her place," Janice said. She gazed at McVey curiously. "It's odd that you should know this weakness of mine. You, a stranger."

McVey smiled. "I'm not such a stranger as you think," he said. "Because of how I felt the first time I saw you." He laughed shortly. "A brash Texan. That's Jeff McVey. You've given me no reason at all to say that, or anything like it. But when I saw you, I wanted to know you. The more I see you, the more I want to know you, Janice."

She shook her head. "Don't call me that," she said. "Only one person does—

Major Bristow. I like to be called Jan. That makes me think that people like me, are friendly toward me. And if people seem friendly, I feel—well, safer."

"All right, Jan," McVey said. "Maybe I'm wrong, but it seems that the one way to get over being afraid is to know what your afraid of, then convince yourself that it can't harm you. And if it did harm you once, maybe a long time ago, you've got to think that it can't again. What did harm you a long time ago, Jan?"

Her face clouded, and she said thickly, "I—I don't like to even think about it." She was silent a moment, studying him, then said abruptly, "It happened nine years ago, when I was eleven. My parents had decided to move to Colorado. My father thought he could do better in the mining country there. He sold his general store in St. Louis, and bought a wagon. We loaded all our belongings, and joined a party of emigrants bound for Colorado. It was a small wagon-train. In western Kansas, when we were close to Colorado, we were attacked by Indians. It—" Her voice broke, and she shuddered.

McVey said, "Go on, Jan. Talk about it. Bring it out into the open."

"It was horrible!" she said huskily. "I saw my father killed, and my mother. And so many others! Then the Indians were everywhere. They looted the wagons, took the horses. They set fire to the wagons. Then they took the survivors—all women and children. They took us a long way, making us walk and never letting us out of their sight. And the women—I was glad then that my mother had been killed.

"I know now that they took us into the Llano Estacado, to the Valley of Tears. There were more Indians there, hundreds of them. And Mexicans with wagons loaded with trade goods. Mule-drawn *carretas*. There were herds of cattle and horses. The Mexicans bartered for the cattle, giving the Indians guns and knives and whiskey—all sorts of things. Then one of the Mexicans wanted to buy me. The Indian who claimed me didn't want to sell me at first, but finally he agreed, because the *comanchero* offered so much. And I suppose, too, that he agreed because I was then a thin and sickly-looking child, not seeming as old as I really was."

AS JAN paused, McVey said, "The *comanchero* was Juan Trujillo?"

"No. He was an old man. I never knew his name."

"He took you to New Mexico, eh?"

Jan nodded. "He was sorry for me," she said. "It was a long trip, and I rode in an empty *carreta*. We traveled slowly, because the *comancheros* had to drive a big herd of cattle. Finally we came to a settlement here in the Territory. It was a native village, but there was a stage station there. A stagecoach had just got in. Major Bristow and his wife were passengers. Martha saw me and—well, she begged the Major to take me from the Mexicans. Because of her, he ransomed me. He had to pay a thousand dollars. I've lived with the Bristows ever since,

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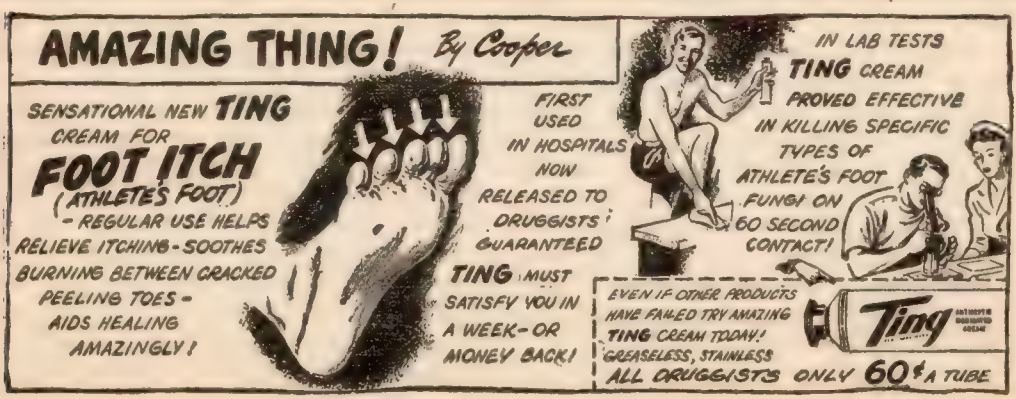
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with Major Bristow and his sister since Martha died." She looked at McVey in a bewildered way. "I've been safe. I've had a good life. Yet I can't forget, and I'm so often afraid."

McVey said, "It's easy to understand your fear. But you've got to make yourself believe that the danger is past, that nothing can happen to you now."

"I try. I keep telling myself that."

"You need somebody else to tell you, too."

"I'm not like this all the time," Jan said. "But when something happens, when there's trouble at the ranch or somewhere nearby, I get the feeling that I'm not safe, that the people important to me aren't safe. When you came to the Crown Ranch and fought with Matt Brock—well, I began to be frightened again. I often come up here, to be alone and to try to figure out what ails me. I came today, because—because I'm upset over what is happening now. Between you and the Crown outfit. And between you and the Trujillo outfit."

"It can't touch you, Jan."

"I wish I was sure."

"Ask Major Bristow. He'll tell you. Ask his sister. Or ask Brazos."

"I can't tell them how I feel."

"Why not?"

"They wouldn't understand, as you do," Jan said wearily. "I'm not close to them. I'm not really close to anyone since Martha Bristow died. And it seems that the older I get, the more Major Bristow changes toward me. Martha treated me like a daughter. He never did, now less than ever. And Louise—well, the longer it goes, the more distant she becomes. I think she dislikes me, but I try not to give her reason to. Then there's Brazos. He's fond of me in his own way, I suppose, but he keeps saying that some day I'll make trouble at the Crown."

"A fool thing to say," McVey said. "What's his reason?"

Jan suddenly smiled. It was a wispy smile, but still it lighted her whole face. "He says that good-looking women are always trouble-makers," she said. "He says that the hands get ideas when they see me. If one shows too much interest in me, Brazos fires him." Her smile faded, and she frowned. "Yet once, not long ago, he told me it was time I picked out a man for a husband. He said that, and still he won't let any man be friendly toward me."

"He's probably got his orders."

"Orders?"

"From Bristow," McVey said.

Jan didn't reply to that. Instead, she looked at McVey with resentment. After a moment, she said, "I should start for home." The friendliness had gone out of her manner, and it was obvious to McVey that she would shrink from anyone who spoke the slightest ill of Major John Bristow.

CHAPTER VIII

Bushwhacker

CLIMBING from the rocks, McVey helped Jan to mount the pinto. He said, "Will you ride here again soon?"

"I don't know. I don't think it will be soon."

"Well, so long. And, remember, there's nothing for you to be afraid of."

Jan forced a smile. "I'll try to remember that," she said, and rode away.

McVey watched her head toward a notch in the hills. He stood there looking after her until she disappeared through the pass. Then he went to the gray, caught up its reins.

He had a foot in the left stirrup and was about to mount when he caught a glint of sunlight on metal on a nearby slope. He froze, peering across the gray's saddle. He saw a movement in the pines on the slope, and after a moment made out a horse. A saddled but riderless horse.

He saw the rider a moment later, crouching behind a fallen dead tree. The man was staring at him, along the barrel

of his rifle. McVey was surprised.

It was easy range for a rifle. And McVey knew that he would be a dead man now if he had risen to his saddle. As it was now, he was a poor target while standing behind his horse. The man on the slope was aware of that and was holding his fire, sensibly, until McVey exposed more of himself.

It was one thing to advise another person not to be afraid. Another to give the same advice to himself. McVey was afraid to move. But he didn't get panicky. After one long moment of staring at the eyes peering at him over the barrel of the rifle, he removed his foot from the stirrup and at the same instant jerked on the gray's reins.

He ran with the horse across the short distance to the rocks where he and Jan Fenton had talked. The gray shielded him until he gained the rocks where he swung the animal about and grabbed his rifle from the boot. Still moving fast, he darted among the boulders. The rifle on the slope cracked, and he heard the shriek of its slug.

McVey crouched among the boulders, throwing his hat aside, and steadying the short barrel of the Henry over a rock. He could no longer see his man clearly, but he could see the fallen tree and knew the bushwhacker's position. He drove a single shot at the slope, and drew a shot in return. The slug struck a boulder to one side of him and ricochetted, screaming. A little puff of powdersmoke marked the bushwhacker's position more definitely for McVey, and he opened fire, driving shot after shot at the man.

He let up after the sixth shot when he saw a figure running wildly through the dense timber toward the horse. He smiled wryly, amused by the thought that the bushwhacker hadn't expected to come up against a repeating rifle. McVey shifted his sights, squeezed out another shot. But a man running through timber made a difficult target.

The man reached his horse, flung himself onto it, went quartering on upslope as fast as the animal could go. McVey drove another shot after him, then dropped from the rocks and mounted his gray. He did not climb the slope, but turned toward the pass through which Jan had disappeared.

Coming through the cut at a hard run, McVey swung south through a stretch of rough country that lay between the hills and the grass flats of Crown range. He saw his quarry descending a slope a quarter of a mile away, and realized he would not be able to intercept him.

The rider struck out across the range in wild flight, once he was down from the slope. He was aware of McVey coming after him, but made no attempt to use his gun. McVey reined in, swung the Henry to his shoulder. He had an easy target now, the man's broad back. But he was reluctant to back-shoot a man, even one who had tried to kill him.

He lowered his rifle, telling himself that there would almost certainly be another meeting between him—and Matt Brock.

For he was sure of it. The fleeing man was the hardcase, Brock.

McVey returned to the rocks to retrieve his hat, then rode slowly along the edge of the lake. He wondered about Brock, about how the man happened to have been there on the slope. It almost seemed as though he had followed Jan. Certainly he had been concealed in the timber all the while McVey had been talking to the girl.

If Brock had followed her, it wasn't likely he had done so for some purpose of his own. A cowhand didn't just go riding off whenever it suited him, not when he had a boss like Old Brazos Addams. It seemed that Brock had come to the hills on orders—on Brazos' orders, or maybe John Bristow's.

But why?

McVEY PUZZLED over that, and decided that it might be because either Brazos or Bristow did not like the idea of Jan riding alone. And so they'd had Brock follow her without her knowledge. And the tough hand, seeing McVey with her, had decided that something

had to be done about the fighting Texan.

So a bullet from ambush had been that something.

McVey didn't like it. He didn't like anything about this country, even though viewing it with a cattleman's eye, it was a fine cattle range. A better range than the semi-desert country in which his own Texas ranch was located. But it was hostile country, no matter in which direction a man headed.

By the time he reached his camp, he knew that he was no longer safe in the little valley. Brock might be back, and not alone, now that he had seen McVey with the girl. That was something he had to keep in mind, McVey reflected. Any man who showed an interest in Jan Fenton was certain to come to grief. He knew that from Brazos, and now from the girl herself.

And he thought he knew this, too—John Bristow was the one who didn't want any man friendly with her.

McVey skipped his noonday meal, and had his supper late in the afternoon. He then moved his stock of grub, his skillet and coffee pot and ax to the west end of the little valley. He made a cache in the brush, among some rocks, and then returned to the camp site he was abandoning.

Slipping the halter onto the dun Crown pack-horse, he saddled his gray. He rode from the valley, leading the run. Once close to Crown range, he slipped the halter off the dun and turned the animal loose, driving it out across the range. He rode back into the hills, dismounted, and waited—smoking a cigarette and thinking of what he planned for tonight—for dusk.

He set out as dusk thickened into darkness, lifting the gray to an easy lope that carried him swiftly across Crown range. He passed the ranch headquarters at a mile's distance, and headed for San Alejandro. He saw the lights of the village an hour after sighting the lighted windows at the Crown, and reined in then to let his horse rest.

When he started out once more, he gave San Alejandro a wide berth. South of the village, he sought the road he knew must be there, a road leading to Juan Trujillo's *rancho.*

The road led through empty country for perhaps half a dozen miles, then McVey rode through a cut in some craggy bluffs and came suddenly upon a cluster of dark adobe huts. A dog started a ferocious barking, but no human voice challenged. McVey passed the 'dobes in a hurry, before the dog aroused the people there. It was a squalid place, and he was sure Trujillo did not live so poorly. More likely, the adobe huts were the homes of men who worked for the *comanchero.*

A half-mile farther on, McVey topped a rise and looked down upon more adobe buildings scattered across a broad hollow. The windows of one of the buildings which appeared to be the main *casa* of the Trujillo *hacienda* were lamplighted. It was a big, L-shaped, two storied building with all doors and windows facing a walled patio.

Approaching the *casa,* McVey found a wide gateway in the wall. The heavy wooden gates stood open. It was evident that the place had been constructed as a fortress to withstand Indian attack.

Riding warily into the patio, McVey saw a saddled horse standing beside the gallery. He reined in, peered about, but saw no one in the patio.

There was a huge cottonwood in the center of the yard, and beyond it a roofed well. McVey dismounted by the cottonwood, taking his Henry rifle with him. He crossed to the gallery. The windows of the *casa* were set with grillwork. The door—he went to the one nearest the lighted windows—was of heavy timber and banded with iron.

He debated a moment about knocking, then decided against it. Tripping the latch, he pushed the door open and stepped into an unlighted room.

There was a doorway on the opposite side of this room, and from beyond it came voices and a glow of lamplight. McVey crossed to the doorway and saw three people in the adjoining room. Two men and a woman.

It was a large room, and although fitted out with American furniture still had that somewhat bare appearance common to all Mexican rooms. The floor covering was of *gerga* fabric; the walls were covered halfway up with calico, and whitewashed above. There was a fireplace at the far end of the room, the burning logs placed upright in it in the native fashion. A hanging oil lamp gave some light, but flickering candles also added their faint glow, working a pattern of light and shadows about the room.

THE WOMAN sat in a straight-backed chair, her hands busy with some sort of needlework. She was a native woman, young and attractive. One of the men was a ruddy-faced American, the other a New Mexican with a definite strain of Spanish blood plainly shown by his lean figure and sharp-featured face.

The men were comfortable in armchairs, with drinks and cigars. They were talking business—something about the cost of some sort of merchandise. The Mexican was protesting that the price was too high.

McVey was full of a mounting excitement. This was Juan Trujillo, certainly. And there he sat, far beyond the protection of his numerous riders, at ease in his great *casa* that he maintained with his profits from stolen Texas stock.

McVey stepped into the room, no longer moving quietly. His boot heels struck sound from the floor in spite of the *gerga* carpet, his spurs jingled. The three people looked up, stared. The woman cried out. The ruddy-faced man looked startled. Trujillo rose from his chair so abruptly that he spilled the whisky from his glass.

"Senor! What is the meaning of this invasion of my home?"

"McVey's the name, Trujillo—in case you haven't guessed it."

"The Texan!"

"The man you've been manhunting, Trujillo."

The woman cried out something in Spanish.

The ruddy-faced man started to rise, than sank back in his chair when McVey gestured wth his rifle and said roughly, "Keep still, you. Keep out of this." He looked back at the *comanchero*. "You sit down, too, hombre," he ordered. "We'll have a talk—before I decide whether to kill you or not."

CHAPTER IX

Comanchero Lair

PLACING his glass and cigar on a table, Trujillo seated himself. His hands gripped the arms of the chair. He stared at McVey, his black eyes ugly with hate. There was no fear in him that McVey could see, but that was to be expected, for a man in the *comanchero* trade would not be a coward. A man without courage would not go into the Llano Estacado to barter with the Comanches.

Trujillo looked like a man of inordinate pride. No doubt he could trace his ancestry back to the *conquistadores*. He was about fifty, black of hair, mustache and eyes. His complexion was sallow. He had a hawk's beak of a nose, a traplike mouth. He was dressed in the old style—gold-embroidered *chaqueta*, crimson sash, laced *calzoneras*. The *comanchero* trade might be his profession, but here in his home he was an *hidalgo*—a grandee.

He said thinly, "What will it gain you to kill me, *Tejano?*"

McVey said, "A lot of satisfaction."

"It would not last long, your satisfaction. My men would hunt you down. You would die slowly and painfully. Have you thought of that?"

"I never worry about what might happen, *comanchero,*" McVey replied. "But whatever happens, I'd figure it was worth ridding the world of a scoundrel like you. What have you done with my men, hombre?"

Trujillo smiled crookedly. "So you are concerned about them, are you? In that case, we will bargain. My life should be worth the lives of sixteen men, no?"

McVey said, "You're a big, important man. But I want a better deal than that. You're not going to have sixteen men murdered, Trujillo. A thing like that would stir up a hornet's nest, and you know it. You can maybe murder one man and get away with it, but sixteen, no. And there's something else. My cattle. I lost twelve hundred head to the Comanches. I have been paid for two hundred ten head, by Major John Bristow of the Crown Ranch. That leaves nine hundred ninety head that you'll have to turn back to me—or pay for."

"*Por Dios!*" Trujillo exclaimed. "You are a crazy man!"

McVey smiled now, an ugly grimace of a smile. "Crazy enough to mean what I say," he retorted. He gestured with the rifle. "What's it be, *comanchero*—a bullet through your greedy belly or my cattle?"

Trujillo looked at the Henry, then back at McVey's face. A trace of worry began to show in his eyes. He squirmed uneasily. The woman rose and came to stand beside him, her hand on his shoulder. She was pale and her eyes showed that she was frightened. She talked to Trujillo in a low, urgent voice, in Spanish. He patted her hand, but continued to watch McVey.

The ruddy-faced man had been silent all this while, puffing nervously on his cigar. He was a stocky man of about thirty-five, dressed like a townsman. He said suddenly, "You can't get away with this, McVey. You know that. Why don't you be sensible and walk out of here while you've still got a chance? I'm sure that Senor Trujillo will agree to that, and not call out his *vaqueros.*"

McVey said, "You've got a stake in this?"

"Senor Trujillo is my friend," the man said. "I don't want to see him murdered." He stared at McVey, then suddenly grinned. "Of course, it's just a bluff. You wouldn't come into a man's home and kill him in front of his wife. It's a bluff that won't work, McVey. You know that. What if Senor Trujillo does promise to return your cattle? You have no riders to drive them away. Besides, if you're here when morning comes—" He paused suddenly. "I'll tell you what, McVey. I'm leaving for San Alejandro now. You come along with me. I'll be a hostage to assure your safe conduct away from here. With me in your power, Senor Trujillo won't send his riders after you."

"Plumb noble," McVey drawled. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Sloane is my name. Frank Sloane. I own a store in San Alejandro."

"You furnish this *comanchero* with trade goods, eh?"

"I do business with Senor Trujillo on occasion."

McVey showed another of his humorless smiles. "Sit down, Sloane," he said. "And keep your mouth shut. I want a hostage, but you're not the one. Trujillo would turn his riders out after me even if I took you as a hostage. You don't think he gives a damn about your life, do you?"

BOTH LOOKED at the *comanchero.* Trujillo had such hate in his eyes for McVey that no one could have doubted that he would raise a hue and cry for the Texan no matter whose life might be endangered.

McVey said, "I didn't risk my life in coming here to work a bluff. I wanted to look at this *comanchero* over a cocked gun, and I was ready to kill him. I still am. I want three things, Trujillo. I want my men freed. I want my cattle. I want this manhunt for me called off. And I'm going to get what I want. In return, I'll let you live. Now you can get on your feet, hombre!"

Trujillo slowly rose. "It is true, Frank," he said thickly. "He is not bluffing." Then, to McVey, "You say you want a hostage. Am I to be it?"

McVey nodded jerkily. "There's a saddle horse outside. Sloane's, I suppose. You'll borrow it, *comanchero.* You'll get on it and you'll ride out ahead of me, with my gun at your back. You savvy?"

The woman cried, "Juan—no! He will kill you!"

"Quiet, Elena," said Trujillo. "He will kill me here if I do not go."

The woman whirled toward McVey. She was but half her husband's age, and she was quick. The Indian strain in her was heavy, and it showed in the savage way in which she flung herself at McVey. She clawed at his face, her nails gashing his cheek and drawing blood. And while he tried to dodge her, McVey saw Trujillo whirl to a table. The *comanchero* jerked open a drawer, grabbed a revolver from it. McVey grabbed up the gun, thrust it into his waistband. He caught hold of Trujillo by the back of his fancy jacket, jerked him to his feet. The man was bleeding slightly at the left temple. There was a dazed look in his eyes.

McVey glanced toward Sloane and Senora Trujillo. The merchant was holding her from behind, by both arms. She was fighting like a she-devil, and her face was ugly with fury.

"Tell her," McVey said to Sloane, "she'll get her man back, if she don't send his *vaqueros* after me. You savvy?"

Delaney at the Bar

The Dude had called for sherry in vain—
With sadness in his eye,
He told the barkeep, "Do your best—
Just so it's light and dry."
Delaney gave the little Dude
A look that's burning yet.
He told the barkeep, "Squeeze it out—
I'll take the part that's *wet!*"

—P. D. West

The woman was screaming wildly, beating at McVey's face with her fists.

And Trujillo, despite his wife being in the way, swung his gun toward McVey.

McVey caught the woman about the waist and flung her bodily toward Frank Sloane as the storekeeper leaped from his chair. And Trujillo's gun roared. McVey was not hit, and was somewhat surprised that he was not. He had kept moving after getting the woman out of range of her husband's gun until he was to one side of the *comanchero* and wielding his Henry like a club.

Trujillo got in another shot, but he also was in motion, trying to elude McVey, and he shot across his chest as he moved. It was an awkward way to fire a heavy, long-barreled Colt. And he missed again. Then the stubby barrel of the Henry rifle caught him alongside the head.

Trujillo cried out, his knees buckling and the revolver falling from his hand.

Sloane nodded jerkily, and got a firmer hold on the woman.

McVey shoved Trujillo ahead of him in sudden haste, because of a fear that the shots that had been fired would bring some of the *comanchero's* men. But he saw no hurrying figures in the darkness when he got Trujillo out into the patio. The night was still, quiet. The Texan goaded his prisoner with the rifle, forcing him to climb onto Sloane's horse. Trujillo swayed in the saddle, moaning. McVey led his own mount from over by the big cottonwood. He dug a piggin'-string from the saddle-bag and tied Trujillo's wrists to the saddle-horn.

Mounting his gray, he caught up the reins of Trujillo's horse and led it toward the gateway. He was passing through it when he heard the woman screaming. Glancing back he saw her come running from the house. Sloane followed her, caught her. The last McVey saw of them,

they were struggling furiously.

He lifted the horses to a run, and shortly sighted the cluster of 'dobes near the cut in the bluffs. The dog there started up its excited yelping again, and this time a man came running from one of the huts as McVey rode through the place. The man had a gun in his hand.

McVey yelled, "Trujillo! Trujillo! *El patron!*"

He confused the Mexican, and was gone before the man could make up his mind to shoot. They were safely through the pass then, and McVey slowed to a walk. He listened for sounds of pursuit and, hearing none, grinned with a bitter sort of pleasure.

Turning off the road then, he continued parallel to it at the distance of a revolver shot. He felt safe enough, convinced that he could swing farther away from the road in time if riders should come along. After a time he lifted the horses to an easy lope, but halted upon seeing the lights of San Alejandro.

HE BUILT and lighted a smoke, then held the match high for a look at Trujillo. The bleeding had stopped from the gash at the man's temple, and he had lost his dazed look. But Trujillo's face looked more hawkish than ever, and his eyes told McVey as well as words how great was the *comanchero's* hate. McVey dropped the match.

He said, talking around his cigarette, "Now you're no longer big and important, Trujillo. You're smaller than a peon. You're a dead man unles you do as I say. You're to take me to my men. You savvy?"

"McVey, you had better kill me because—"

"Don't think I won't, *comanchero*, if you give me cause."

"My time will come if I live. And when it does—"

McVey cut in, "We'll talk about that when your time comes. Where are my men, Trujillo? In San Alejandro? Or have you had them taken away from there?" When no answer came, he swung his horse close to Trujillo's and, in a sudden flare-up of temper, slapped the man across the face. "Talk, damn you!" he shouted.

Trujillo reeled under the blow, then said tauntingly, "You are a brave one, when you have a man's hands tied. A very brave man, *Tejano*!"

"Don't try to make me out a no-good!" McVey raged. "Not you, you peddler of guns and whisky to the murderers of peaceful settlers! You want me to untie your hands, *comanchero*? Say so, if you do. I'll accommodate you. Yeah!"

Trujillo stared at him, and even in the darkness McVey could see the bravado leak out of him. It was one thing to venture into the Staked Plains with a big bunch of armed men; it took courage, true, but then a man was not alone—and besides his men, he had the knowledge that for as long as could be remembered there had been a certain understanding between the New Mexicans and the Comanches. It was something else to be alone against an infuriated Texan, and Juan Trujillo lacked that brand of courage. He did not want to fight Jeff McVey, not until he had some of his *compadres* to side him.

He said dully, "Your men are no longer at San Alejandro."

"Keep talking!"

"They are on their way to Fort Bascom. My *vaqueros* will turn them over to the soldiers—as bandits."

McVey swore. "How long since they left San Alejandro?"

Trujillo hesitated a moment, then decided that the truth would serve him better than a lie. "They left at sundown," he said. "You can catch up with them easily enough. They are not too far on the way."

"Lucky for you," McVey said, and reached out to untie the man's hands. "Take the reins, *comanchero*," he ordered. "We're going to ride fast. And don't try to slip away from me. I've got a fast horse under me, and my rifle shoots more than one bullet."

Trujillo rubbed his wrists, and said sullenly, "I have heard about your rifle,

Tejano." He leaned forward, catching up his mount's trailing reins.

And rode on at a lope.

McVey kept behind him, along the road east from San Alejandro toward Las Vegas and Fort Bascom. There was a moon to light their way.

CHAPTER X

A Hostage Worthwhile

NOT long after midnight McVey and his *comanchero* prisoner topped a ridge and saw a band of horsemen traveling the road ahead through a narrow canyon. The road made a hair-pin turn at the end of the ridge and sloped steeply into the canyon. The riders were directly below McVey and his unwilling companion, six or seven hundred feet below.

McVey said sharply, "Quiet, Trujillo! I don't want a sound out of you—yet!"

He got the piggin-string out of his saddle-bag, and again tied the *comanchero's* wrists to the saddle-horn.

"Now," he said, "call to your men!"

"And tell them—what?"

"That you're joining them."

Trujillo muttered an oath in Spanish, then leaned forward and shouted at the top of his lungs: *"Hola, amigos!"*

The riders below—they could be plainly seen in the moonlight bathing the canyon floor—came to an abrupt halt. They were small, dark figures at that distance, but McVey could pick up his own men from the Trujillo *vaqueros.* The sixteen men riding by pairs in a column were his Texans. The half-dozen other riders were spread out about the column, keeping a wary distance. Now the *vaqueros* gathered in a group, stared up at the canyon's rim as Trujillo identified himself and called each of them by name.

There were shouted questions from below, and for a few minutes the Spanish flew too thick and fast, and McVey, with little knowledge of the language, couldn't follow it. He broke in on Trujillo's shouting finally, saying,

"Tell them that they're to throw down their guns. Tell them, too, that if any one of them tries to start anything, you'll be the one to die first. Tell them, Trujillo!"

The man obeyed, and when he stopped shouting, McVey grasped the reins of the *comanchero's* horse and led it toward the descent into the canyon. He held the reins of his own gray and those of the *comanchero's* horse in his left hand. In his right, he held his Henry rifle.

The entire band of horsemen awaited their approach, silent and unmoving. Once in the canyon, McVey knotted the reins of Trujillo's horse and threw them back over the mount's neck. He dropped behind Trujillo, and finally, within short bullet range of the horsemen, he said, "Far enough, *comanchero*!"

But Trujillo, with his hands bound, was unable to stop his horse. McVey swung alongside him and pulled it to a halt. The Texans still did not recognize Trujillo's companion. McVey knew that by the quiet way they sat their horses.

He called to them, "This is McVey, buckos! I've got a gun at Trujillo's back. Have those Mexes got rid of their guns?"

There was a chorus of shouted "Nos!"

McVey jabbed the Henry's muzzle against Trujillo's side. "Remember," he said flatly. "You'll be the first to die."

Trujillo shouted at his men again, his voice none too steady. There was some talk among them, then McVey heard the sound of guns hitting the ground. One of the Texans cut loose with the old Rebel yell, then the whole band was in motion. They charged at their erstwhile guards; there were shouts, curses, screams. Two of the Mexicans managed to escape, riding on through the canyon as fast as their horses would go. The others were knocked from their mounts, then seized by the Texans who dropped from their horses. There was a mêlée for a moment as the Texans made a scramble for the weapons

on the ground.

They were in a rowdy good humor when they came to McVey, shoving their four prisoners ahead of them. One of them, lanky Charlie Doyle, said, "Boss, we figured you were a goner. You and Tom Shannon and old Pete Macklin."

McVey grinned at them. "I'm still kicking. Tom is laid up at the Crown Ranch, recovering from a wound. Old Pete high-tailed. I guess he's well on his way back to Texas by now."

Tip Harmon pointed a gun at Trujillo. "Who this, Jeff?" he demanded. "Trujillo, maybe?" He didn't wait for McVey to answer. "Let's find a tree and string him up!"

Some of the others shouted approval of the idea.

McVey said, "He's worth too much alive. As long as we've got him in our hands, we can move safely about this country. And he's going to help me get back my cattle. No, we're not hanging him, even if he does deserve it."

THEY gave him no argument, knowing that the recovery of the JM-Connected cattle had been their only reason for coming to New Mexico. They were satisfied to have Trujillo in their power. There was some grumbling because they had been given but one meal while prisoners, and that early in the day. They had gone more than twelve hours without eating. They wanted their own guns back, too. Their rifles and six-shooters were in the *cantina* at San Alejandro.

"We'll go back to San Alejandro," McVey told them. "And the sooner we get there, the sooner you'll eat—and get back your guns. Let's get started . . . ."

It was mid-morning when they reached the village with their prisoners. The whole of San Alejandro turned out to stare at them—men, women, children. The natives were silent, sullen. Most of the men were armed, but no attempt was made to rescue Trujillo. McVey rode with his rifle resting on his right thigh. Eight other Texans were armed, with guns taken from the *vaqueros*, and they kept their weapons in their hands.

They rode into the plaza, halted before the *cantina*. The proprietor, a fat man with a big *bandido* mustache, eyed them uneasily. His wife, almost as fat as he was, peered over his shoulder.

McVey called to the *cantina* couple, "Fix a meal for us, pronto." He smiled with wry amusement. "For all of us. We're Senor Trujillo's guests."

Some of the Texans were already dismounted, and they surged toward the doorway of the *cantina* and forced the proprietor and his wife back into the place. Shortly, all of McVey's men had retrieved their weapons and stood staring at the villagers with rifles in the bends of their arms.

McVey dismounted and untied Trujillo's hands from the saddle-horn. The *comanchero* dismounted awkwardly. His hands were useless temporarily, after being bound for so long a time. The man looked all in. Blood from the gash at his left temple had dried along the side of his face. His shoulders sagged. He was no longer the proud *hidalgo*. But his black eyes still smoldered with hatred for Jeff McVey.

Frank Sloane came from his store, an anxious look on his broad, ruddy face. So far, Sloane was the only gringo that McVey had seen in San Alejandro. Sloane brushed past a couple of Texans who would have barred his way, strode directly toward Trujillo.

"Senor! You are all right?"

"I am alive," Trujillo replied. "And that is all that matters."

Sloane turned to McVey, scowling. "You've got what you wanted," he said angrily. "Why don't you free him, let him go home to his wife?"

McVey smiled thinly. "I've only got a part of what I want," he said. "When I get back my cattle and am safely on my way out of the Territory, I'll let him go back to his wife. But right now I need him more than she does." He turned to the cowboy named Charlie Doyle. "Better have some of the boys take care of the horses. You can probably get some grain

at Sloane's store. It can be charged to Trujillo's account."

He gave Trujillo a shove toward the *cantina*, and Frank Sloane followed them into the place. Trujillo sat down at a table, dropped his head in his arms. McVey leaned against the bar, rolling a smoke. Sloane paced restlessly to and fro, muttering. Back in the kitchen the proprietor and his wife chattered excitedly in Spanish as they busied themselves preparing the meal McVey had ordered.

McVey said finally, "Give the *comanchero* a drink, Sloane. He needs something to get back his nerve."

Sloane gave him a black look, but obeyed. He gave Trujillo a stiff drink of whisky, then offered him a cigar. The whisky picked up Trujillo somewhat. He accepted the cigar, puffed it alight from the match Frank Sloane held for him.

McVey said, "I'm going to give you a chance to wriggle out of this, *comanchero*. I've a hunch it'll take quite a while to get back my cattle, unless you've got them on your range. Which I doubt. You've probably sold the lot of them. So if you want to get back to your wife in a hurry, I'll let you pay me for the nine hundred and ninety head—at the same price Major Bristow paid me for the two hundred and ten head. Twenty dollars a head, Trujillo. What do you say?"

"I say that you will not get so much as a single dollar from me, *Tejano* dog," Trujillo replied surlily. "You will have to try to get back your cattle. I am in no hurry to return to my home while you make your way back to Texas. No, hombre, the longer it goes, the greater the odds that my day will come. And then"—he spat the words at McVey—"then I will cut your heart out!"

IT WAS a native meal that was served to the Texans—tamales, chili con carne and frijoles. But there was plenty of it. The *cantina* proprietor and his wife, two frightened people, had outdone themselves. *Los Tejanos* were catered to as honored guests. Even Juan Trujillo ate his fill. A man needed to keep his strength up, if he would live to have revenge. The *comanchero's* manner said that only because of that did he eat in company with his captors.

Jeff McVey ate the hotly seasoned food with little relish. He had laughed at Trujillo's threat to cut out his heart, but he knew that the *comanchero* would live from now on only to avenge himself on the man he hated. The man had once devoted the greatest part of his life to making a fortune and the lesser part, no doubt, to making love to his attractive young wife. But no longer would gold or love satisfy him. He wanted the blood of Jeff McVey, the hated Texan!

And Trujillo was playing it smart, McVey told himself as he finished his food and rolled a smoke. It was true—the longer it took McVey to finish his mission here in New Mexico, the greater were Trujillo's chances of turning the tables on him. He would hope for McVey to grow lax, and at the first moment the Texan was off guard, he would strike—and he would strike with all the cunning and cruelty that was native to a *comanchero*.

McVey rose from the bench at the table, motioning to the lanky Charlie Doyle who also had finished eating. They went to the doorway, looked out into the plaza where many of the people of San Alejandro still loitered in curiosity.

The four *vaqueros* who had been taken prisoner in the canyon and released here in the village now squatted in the shade of a building across the plaza. They stared at McVey with brooding eyes, waiting for something more to happen. He did not need to be told that they would try to rescue their *patron* at the first opportunity.

McVey said, "Charlie, I know the whole crew has had a hard time of it, but I'm going to move out before dark tonight. Trujillo's wife is a wild one, and I've a hunch she'll show up with a bunch of his men. I don't want them to trap us in this place. Another reason I don't want to stay here is that the boys will start likkering up. If that happens, we'll be in for real trouble."

Charlie Doyle nodded. He was one of the steadier hands among the crew, and he was well aware that their position had its danger. "You're right, Jeff," he said. "We'd better move out."

"Take some of the boys and find our pack-horses," McVey told him. "If you can't find our camp gear and grub, get what we need from Sloane's store. Tell Sloane to see me, and I'll pay the bill."

Doyle nodded, and turned back inside to get some of the others. When he left the *cantina*, he took four of the crew with him.

McVey turned back to talk to Trujillo. The *comanchero* had left the table and was at the bar sulking over a glass of *tequila*. McVey said, "We'll rest up until late this afternoon, then clear out of here. Where will I find the largest number of my cattle, *commanchero*?"

"You are a man of great wisdom," Trujillo sneered. "Find them yourself."

"All right. We'll go to your ranch."

Trujillo sneered some more.

McVey said, "So I won't find any of my stock there, eh? That's all right, Trujillo. I will have a talk with Senora Trujillo. She is anxious to get you back unharmed, and no doubt she'll willingly tell me where you sold my cattle."

Trujillo scowled deeper. Last night he had endangered his wife by his attempt to shoot McVey, but now he was all concern for her. He said flatly, "My wife knows nothing of my affairs. Do not molest her, *Tejano*." In his case, it seemed that absence did make the heart grow fonder. "I will take you to the *rancho* of Miguel Gonzales who has some of your cattle."

McVey nodded, and was smiling faintly as he moved away.

From the doorway he saw two riders come into the plaza. Major John Bristow and—McVey felt his pulse quicken—Jan Fenton. He called to Tip Harmon to keep an eye on Trujillo, then stepped out to meet the two from the Crown Ranch. They reined in at Sloane's store, and McVey reached Jan just in time to give her a hand down.

She gave him a wavering smile. Major Bristow dismounted, frowning at McVey. For an instant McVey thought that Bristow would object to his attentions to the girl. The man did seem about to speak but then, with a shrug, he took out and lighted a cigar.

McVey could think of nothing to say to Jan, except to ask about Tom Shannon. She told him just what he expected, that Shannon was on the way to recovery. Then she added, "He's worried about you, Jeff."

Bristow choked. Then said, forcing a smile, "Jeff, is it? You two have become friendly?" He divided a look between them, letting his gaze linger on Jan. "That's surprising," he added. "It's not like you to make friends so quickly, Janice."

CHAPTER XI

Refused, With Thanks

JAN was grave today. The fear that had been in her eyes that morning at the lake wasn't showing now, but she was young and should be full of the liveliness of youth, McVey reflected. She s h o u l d have a smile on her lips and laughter in her eyes. Her present mood made her seem too old for her years.

McVey said, "Give Tom a message for me, Jan. Tell him not to worry about me. Tell him the boys are with me again, all but Pete Macklin who's probably on his way back to Texas. Will you do that, Jan?"

She nodded, smiling that wavering smile.

Bristow said, "So you've got your crew back, McVey? You surprise me. I didn't think you could handle Juan Trujillo like that."

"Trujillo and I understand each other, Major."

"Oh?"

McVey eyed him smilingly. "Trujillo and I had a heart to heart talk," he said. "He's going to help me get back my cattle. We're leaving for the Gonzales *rancho* later today. Trujillo is over at the *cantina*, with some of my men."

Bristow showed genuine surprise. "You mean he's in your hands?"

"That's it."

"But how?"

McVey shrugged. "I dropped in on him last night," he said. "And persuaded him to go along and free my men. He hadn't much choice. It was that or a bullet, and Senor Trujillo decided that he wanted to live a while longer."

Jan shuddered.

Bristow stared hard at McVey, as though not sure whether or not the Texan were joking. Then, convinced, he said laughingly, "You're an amazing man, McVey. I have to admire you. Now if you'll excuse us—" His amusement was gone, and the frown was back on his face. He took Jan's arm, and said sharply, "Come along, Janice."

He led her into the store.

McVey stood there a moment, knowing for sure now that Major Bristow considered Janice Fenton more than his ward. It was a knowledge that McVey didn't like.

When McVey went back into the *cantina*, a few of the Texans were doing some drinking, but at the moment it was nothing for him to worry about. Trujillo was still drinking *tequila*, however, and seemed well on the way to getting drunk. Tip Harmon was keeping a close watch on him. Charlie Doyle returned shortly and reported to McVey that he had located the outfit's camp gear and grub in the barn behind the *cantina*. The pack-horses were in the corral.

"Some of the boys are saddling 'em," Doyle said. "But we'll wait until you're ready to pull out to pack the stuff on 'em."

John Bristow entered the *cantina* a few minutes later, moving up to the bar. He ordered a drink from the proprietor, then eyed Trujillo curiously.

"Looks as though your luck has run out, *amigo*," he said. "But that's life. One day our luck is good, the next it's bad."

Trujillo faced about, leaned back with his elbows on the bar. "Every dog has his day," he said. "Right now it is time for this *Tejano* dog to howl." He spat, to show his contempt. "You tell him, *amigo*. Tell him he will not howl for long."

"It would do no good, Trujillo. A man like McVey must be shown."

"*Si*. And I will show him!"

Trujillo turned back to the bar, poured himself another drink. Bristow smiled curiously then, ignoring the *comanchero*, he paid for his whisky and downed it. Turning from the bar, he nodded toward the door while looking at McVey. He walked out, and McVey followed him. Jan was not in sight, but her pinto and Bristow's sorrel still stood in front of Sloane's store. McVey eyed Bristow curiously.

"What's on your mind, Major?"

"To be truthful, McVey, I can admire your courage without being especially fond of you," Bristow said. "But it seems that Janice has taken a fancy to you. She's asked me to give you what help I can in getting your cattle back. So I'm offering my services, for what they're worth."

McVey was taken by surprise. "You don't mean that, Bristow?"

"I'm not in the habit of saying things I don't mean."

"Siding me will make Trujillo your enemy. And he's a bad hombre to have for an enemy."

"I'm not going to side you against him," Bristow said. "I told Janice I wouldn't go for that. But I will go so far as to see that you get away with what you've started. You'll run into trouble at the Gonzales ranch. I'll have Brazos and some of my crew drop by there tomorrow, not to join in a fight—if there should be one—but on the chance that their presence will influence Gonzales not to start one."

McVEY was suspicious, and looked it. Bristow smiled faintly. "No, it's not a scheme to trip you up. When my

ward asks for something, I try to humor her. Where you're concerned, I'll also be helping to avoid bloodshed on this range—I hope It may be, McVey, that if my crew has a sobering effect on the ranchers while you're repossessing your cattle Trujillo's life may be saved. I've an idea you'll kill him at the first threat of trouble. Right?"

McVey nodded. "You're right about that," he said. "But I'm not so sure your crew will keep trouble from breaking out."

"Then you're refusing my offer?"

"It might be the smart thing to do."

"Suit yourself," Bristow said. "But Janice will be disappointed."

He turned away abruptly, striding toward Sloane's store. The war in which Bristow had been an officer was two years past, but there was still a ramrod in his back. Jan came from the store, with Frank Sloane accompanying her to the door. Bristow helped her mount. When they turned across the plaza, Jan looked in McVey's direction. And smiled. It wasn't a wavering smile now, but one that lighted her lovely face.

McVey smiled in return, waved to her.

He knew she was thinking he had accepted Bristow's offer to send the Crown crew to the Gonzales ranch. And he wondered if he shouldn't have accepted it. It was possible that he was suspicious of John Bristow without good reason. It was also possible that there would be trouble at the Gonzales ranch . . . .

The Texans rode from San Alejandro late in the afternoon. Once out of sight of the village, McVey told Tip Harmon and Chris Wyatt to drop behind and see if they were being followed. They were traveling southeast, Trujillo having told McVey that the Gonzales ranch lay in that direction.

The *comanchero* was drunk. He swayed in the saddle. He muttered in Spanish. At times he swore bitterly, and at times he laughed crazily. But finally, after being in the saddle for several hours, he lapsed into a brooding silence, with the hangdog look of a man pitying himself.

McVey called a halt when darkness came, and they made camp. One of the older hands, Cole Ambers, volunteered to do the cooking. Ambers had the food on the fire by the time Harmon and Wyatt rode in. They told McVey that the outfit was not being followed, so far as they could tell.

"But we rode back to see what was going on in the village after we left," Tip Harmon said. "The place was swarming with riders, and more of them were coming in all the time. It was like they came out of the ground, Jeff. We watched from some brush, but none of them came this way."

McVey nodded. "They figure they ought to do something, but don't know what," he said. "If they had a leader, they might be able to plan some move. But without Trujillo to think for them— Well, just so they don't get a notion to follow us and pick a fight. We'll take turns standing guard tonight, to be on the safe side."

Trujillo didn't eat with them when the grub was ready. He was wrapped in a serape which had been given to him, along with a sombrero, by the proprietor of the *cantina* in San Alejandro. He was sound asleep now, and McVey was unable to wake him.

McVey named four of the men to keep watch, once supper was eaten, and he and the others spread their bedrolls and turned in. McVey slept but two hours, then crawled from his blankets to stand guard with the Henry rifle in the bend of his arm. He told the four men who were doing sentry duty to turn in, then had the night to himself.

The campfire had burned to a handful of embers, and McVey kicked dirt onto them to kill their glow. He made sure of Trujillo. The man was still deep in the sleep that too much *tequila* had induced. The night was still, quiet. Quiet except for the snores of some of the men. It was moonlight, which was in McVey's favor. It would be difficult for riders to approach without being easy targets.

McVey kept moving about, circling the

camp. Around midnight, he paused beside a boulder and leaned his rifle against it. He took out makings and was rolling a smoke when a movement caught his eye. A man was crawling away from the camp, aiming for a brush thicket. McVey dropped his cigarette, reached for his rifle. He didn't like to scare the sleeping Texans, but Trujillo needed a scare thrown into him.

THE *comanchero* was crawling more quickly now, evidently thinking that no one was on guard. McVey swung the Henry to his shoulder, took careful aim, squeezed the trigger.

Trujillo's scream echoed the shot. He fell flat on his face and writhed on the ground. The Texans jumped from their blankets, guns in their hands. McVey said, "It's all right. It's just that fool Trujillo."

He went to where the man lay squirming and moaning, prodded him with the toe of his boot. "Come on, *comanchero*," he said roughly. "Quit your carrying on. You're not hurt bad."

He'd burned Trujillo across the back with his shot. The slug had torn his *chaqueta*, the shirt under it, and slightly creased the man's hide. But Trujillo acted as if he were seriously wounded.

Some of the Texans had come to take a look at him. They hauled him to his feet, ripped open his clothes, and Charlie Doyle struck a match. Doyle laughed, and said, "I've drawn more blood than that, shaving."

Trujillo calmed somewhat, stung more by the laughter of the Texans than by the slug. He cursed McVey in Spanish, but his heart wasn't in it. He knew he had acted foolishly, had shamed himself before these men who he held in contempt. Trujillo, the proud *hidalgo*, had lost face.

McVey said, "The Comanches aim at the vitals when they use the guns you give them against Texans, *comanchero*. Next time I'm apt to shoot you in the belly. Remember that when you get another idea that you can escape." He gestured with his rifle. "Now get back to your blanket!"

That was the only disturbance of the night, and by sun-up the outfit had breakfasted and were in the saddle. Trujillo had refused to eat, but he had let McVey force some coffee on him. He now rode between McVey and Charlie Doyle, slumped in the saddle and with a sullen expression on his face.

They rode through hilly country for several hours. Then, at mid-morning, they dropped down on the Gonzales range. Bunches of cattle were in sight in every direction, and finally some adobe buildings came into sight.

The men from Texas were expected. They could tell that by the large number of riders about the ranch headquarters, too many to be merely the Gonzales crew. McVey halted his men a hundred yards from the place, and shortly three men came riding out to meet them.

McVey said, "This Gonzales?"

Trujillo nodded jerkily.

Miguel Gonzales, riding a white horse, was a thick-bodied man with a heavy black mustache. His sombrero was huge. Across his chest was a bandolier of cartridges, and across his saddle he carried a rifle. He looked like a *bandido jefe* from across the Border. The riders flanking him were young, lean, tough *vaqueros*. The three reined in facing the Texans and their prisoner, Gonzales looking at Trujillo with murky eyes.

Gonzales talked to Trujillo in Spanish, and Charlie Doyle, listening intently, caught the drift of the talk. He told McVey, "The big hombre says that he has thirty men, some of them Trujillo's boys. He says that he will kill all us *Tejanos*."

McVey had his Henry rifle resting on his thigh. He said, "You, Gonzales. You savvy gringo?"

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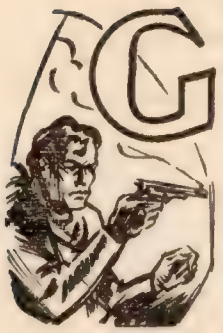
CHAPTER XII

Rannihan Cupid



GONZALES stared at McVey. He stared at McVey's rifle. It was evident that he had heard from the Trujillo riders that McVey carried a repeating rifle. Like all the rifles to be seen in the Southwest, Gonzales's own weapon was a single-shot. But it was newer than most seen in the vicinity—a breech-loading Springfield. And not even all the Army was as yet armed with breech-loaders. Gonzales eyed McVey's Henry with respect, and something more. It was apparent that he coveted the weapon.

McVey said, "Tell him, Charlie, to put his thirty men to work gathering what JM-Connected cattle he has on his range. Tell him that Trujillo's life depends on him doing as I say."

Doyle spoke to the *ranchero* in Spanish, and Gonzales answered, scowling.

Doyle said to McVey, "He says he paid ten dollars a head for all the cattle he bought from Trujillo. He says, too, that he didn't bother with brands, and don't know if he has any cattle in your iron."

The men at the ranch headquarters now were mounting their horses and riding out onto the range in pairs. As Doyle talked to Gonzales, McVey saw the *ranchero's* men form a loose circle about his own band. The circle of course was intended as a trap, McVey knew, but his men were aware of it.

Four of them swung around behind Gonzales and his two *companeros* to form a trap within a trap. Gonzales squirmed uneasily in the saddle of his big white horse.

Doyle said, "Jeff, I've told him he's to turn JM-Connected cattle over to us and settle with Trujillo later." A grin spread across Doyle's lean face. "I told him he and Trujillo are both our hostages. He says that's not so, that he'll ride away when he's ready."

McVey glanced at Trujillo. The *comanchero* had a sickly look. He had a hangover from *tequila*, but no doubt he also was remembering how McVey had shot at him during the night. Fear came more easily to a man feeling sick from too much *tequila*.

McVey said to him, "Better talk sense into him, *comanchero*."

Trujillo reasoned with Gonzales at some length, and the *ranchero's* show of bravado gradually faded. It was evident that Trujillo was able to convince Gonzales that the Texans meant business. Then to cinch matters, a band of horsemen appeared from the northwest. There were a dozen riders in this bunch, and as they drew near McVey saw that old Brazos Addams was leading them.

Brazos halted his men outside the circle of *vaqueros*, then came on alone. The old fellow's bearded face was amused.

"Looks like I got here just in time, McVey," he said. "A drop of a hat, and there'll be a real gun-battle here. I've got orders to see to it that there's no bloodshed and that Senor Trujillo comes to no harm. I'm going to sort of referee this dispute."

"You sure you've got no other orders, Brazos?"

"What other orders?"

McVey eyed him suspiciously. "No tricks," he said. "You'll get Trujillo killed, sure, if you try to interfere wth me."

"No tricks," Brazos replied. "My orders were to keep Trujillo alive. And at the same time see that you got a square deal." He looked at Trujillo, then at Gonzales. "Look, senor. Major Bristow was in the same fix as you are now. He dealt with this loco Texan. You'd better do the same. All the feller wants is his cattle, and by damn, you can't hate him for that. Let's settle this peaceful-like."

Gonzales must have had some understanding of English, for he muttered a Spanish oath and swung his horse away. He rode off yelling wildly, his two com-

panions following him, and the *vaqueros* ringing the Texans breaking their encirclement to join him. Midway between McVey's band and the ranch buildings, Gonzales reined in. Gesturing wildly with his rifle, he gave the *vaqueros* their orders. He went on to his headquarters then and the thirty-odd *vaqueros* turned out across the range.

Brazos chuckled. "Well, that does it. You'll get your cattle, McVey, and Trujillo comes out of it with a whole hide. You may as well go into camp somewhere around here, and sit tight until the *vaqueros* make the gather. I'll bring my boys over and—"

McVey broke in, "Keep your riders away from here, Brazos. If they come within range, my boys will open fire on them."

"What's the matter? Don't you trust anybody?"

"I haven't forgotten how one of your hands used a branding-iron on me, Brazos, and they haven't either. After I'd whipped your man in a fair fight."

"Shucks, that's over and done with, McVey. I figured you'd be friendly. Major Bristow sent us here, out of the goodness of his heart, and—"

"I'll believe that when I'm safe out of this country."

"It's on the level. The girl wanted it. She worked on Bristow. On me, too. She said, 'Brazos, don't let anything happen. Help Jeff McVey get his cattle back.' And I gave her my word I'd do just that."

"Just so you keep your word," McVey said. "In the meantime, keep your riders away from my outfit."

Brazos growled, "All right," and rodē back to his Crown riders.

McVEY moved to a stretch of rocky land along a creek a half mile to the east. The site had caught his eye because of its proximity to water and because the boulders would give him and his men some cover if anything went wrong and they came under attack. McVey kept a closer watch on Trujillo than at any time since the *comanchero* had fallen into his hands. He was well aware that it would be a fatal error for him and his Texans if he let Trujillo escape at this critical point in the tricky game.

The Crown hands went into camp about a quarter-mile away, after their chuck-wagon arrived. Nothing more was seen of the burly Miguel Gonzales, but his riders and those from the Trujillo ranch were working down from the north end of the range, cutting JM-Connected cattle out of the Gonzales herd and bunching them together under a two-man guard.

When the *vaqueros* reached the creek that was a natural dividing line cutting the range in two, they turned their gather —one hundred and seventy-two JM-Connected cattle—over to a half-dozen of McVey's riders. By that time, it was sundown and the roundup on the southern portion of the range would have to wait until tomorrow. McVey and his men would have to remain camped here over night, an idea that McVey didn't like as he considered it.

He had the cookfire killed as soon as they had eaten, and named two hands to ride night herd on the cattle and two others to take the first turn at standing guard at the camp. As an added precaution, he took his lariat and tied Trujillo hand and foot. The *comanchero* cursed him for this added indignity, but McVey was deaf to his outburst.

Brazos Addams came riding over from the Crown camp as darkness closed in over the range. McVey stepped forward to meet him, carrying his rifle. Brazos dismounted, chewed his tobacco cud, spat, and finally said, "I'm beginning to get a notion you can get away with it, McVey."

"You ride over here just to say that, Brazos?"

"Don't rile up so easy, *amigo*. Shucks, I'm all for you. I'm hoping you get out of this with your cattle—and a whole hide. You know, McVey, you remind me of myself when I was a young hombre. Yeah, I was just as tough and loco as you. Come West when I was twenty. Settled in Texas when it was still a part of Mexico. Did a lot of fighting in my time. Soldiered in the Mexican War, too. Settled here after

Kearny's Army of the West took Santa Fe. Married a native woman." Brazos spat tobacco juice again. "She died ten years ago. A fine woman she was, though she never gave me any sons. Good for a man, marriage."

McVey eyed him curiously. "You're a talker tonight, Brazos."

"Yeah. Ain't I, though?"

"What's it all leading up to?"

Brazos hemmed and hawed, then said haltingly, "Just been wondering if you were a married man. Kind of figured you ain't, you being so reckless. An hombre with a wife back home wouldn't take such chances. Well, like I said, it seems that Jan has taken a shine to you. Now, sir, she's like a daughter to me, that girl is, and—"

"Like you said?" McVey broke in. "When did you say she'd taken a shine to me?"

"Didn't I mention it?" Brazos shook his head, tugged at his beard. "Getting absent-minded, in my old age. I was saying, McVey, that she's like a daughter to me and I won't always be around to look out for her. Now, if she was married to a good man—well, it'd be a weight off my mind. Yes, sir!"

"You loco, Brazos? Once you told me not to get notions about her."

"A man can change his mind, can't he?"

"Sure. But why'd you change yours about me?"

Brazos didn't answer at once. He looked off across the moonlit range, chewing his tobacco cud. Finally he mumbled, "I'm meddling in something that's no concern of mine, I reckon. But I'm fond of Jan, and I'd like to see her happy once in her life. And since she's taken a fancy to you—well, McVey, I'll lay my cards on the table. Things at Crown headquarters ain't what they seem to an outsider. There's the girl, grateful to Major Bristow because he bought her from the *comancheros* when she was a kid. Sure, she should be grateful. But now that she's grown up and such a handsome filly—. Well, it's hard to put in into words."

"Bristow wants her. Is that it, Brazos?"

"You're a sharp one, McVey."

"I've got eyes to see with."

"The Major is all right in some ways," the old man continued. "In others, he's no damn' good at all. This thing of not letting Jan have any young fellers around—and making her believe the Crown Ranch is the only place for her. I've got eyes to see with, too. Yeah, I reckon he wants her, McVey. And him more than twice her age. His sister knows what he's got in his mind, and don't like it any. Miss Louise is all right."

HE WAS silent a moment, working on his chew. Then he added, "I figure if some hombre with plenty of nerve came courting Jan—. Or maybe she don't take your eye, McVey?"

McVey smiled. "I'm no wooden Indian, Brazos," he said. "But my chances of courting any woman here in the Territory aren't much good. If I'm lucky, I may be able to get out of New Mexico with my cattle. But if I ever come back here, I'll be a target for every hombre who's ever heard my name."

"Where you bound with your cattle?"

"The Colorado mining country. That's where I was headed when the Comanches jumped me in the Llano Estacado and stole my herd."

"You could take her to Colorado with you, marry her there."

"Don't be too sure she'd go with me, friend."

"I tell you she's taken a fancy to you," Brazos insisted. "I can see it. Bristow knows it. So does Miss Louise. But if you ain't got the nerve—"

McVey eyed him narrowly. "I thought you claimed to be loyal to Bristow," he said. "Looks to me like you're crossing him up."

Brazos shook his head. "I'm loyal to my outfit, sure," he said. "But this is something else. I'll side Bristow on anything but his wanting the girl. Sure, I've run cowhands off the Crown who got too friendly with her. But only because none of them was the kind Jan should take up with. She deserves the best, McVey. She

rates a man who can look out for her and give her a decent life. A man of her own choosing, too. This country is overrun with hombres who haven't a dollar to their name, but you've already got money in your pocket and you'll have a lot more when you get to Colorado. You've no doubt got a ranch back in Texas. You'll be a big man some day. You'll do all right by a woman. And besides, Jan favors you."

McVey didn't reply. He took out makings and, without conscious thought, began rolling a smoke. It was crazy, a boot-tough old rannihan like Brazos Addams playing Cupid. It seemed incredible that Jan Fenton had fallen in love with him, and yet it wasn't likely that Brazos would say such a thing unless he was convinced of it.

Nothing else good had happened to McVey since he had come into this hostile land, and because he was so keenly aware of that he couldn't quite believe that so wonderful a thing as Jan's being in love with him could happen. Still, he wanted to believe it. Yes, he wanted her for his wife.

He lighted his cigarette, and in the glare of the match his face was frowning and his eyes troubled.

But for Brazos, he would have gone from New Mexico with only a pleasant memory of the girl—a memory that would be with him during the rest of his life—and with the conviction, too, that she was not for him. Now he would leave the Territory, because he was a marked man, with the knowledge that she might have been his. Unless he dared risk his life further by staying on to win her.

It wasn't possible that she would go to Colorado with him on the spur of the moment. A girl like Jan would have to be courted in proper fashion. She would need time to make up her mind, to decide if her heart was right about him. A woman needed to be won over a period of time. A courtship could take months. And he dared not linger that long in New Mexico.

"I don't know, Brazos," he said. "I don't know."

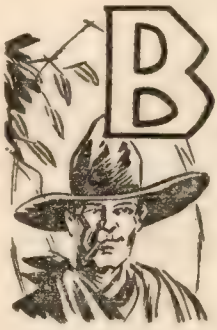
"So you don't have the guts to take her," Brazos said, his voice full of contempt. He turned to his horse, mounted. "Well, I reckon I was mistaken in you. So long, McVey."

He spat disgustedly. And rode away.

McVey stood there lost in thought, wanting Jan Fenton as he had never wanted anything in his life before, and not seeing how he could have her. He tried to imagine what she would say and do if he went to her, when he was ready to leave the Territory, and said, "Jan, come with me." She would consider him loco.

CHAPTER XIII

"You'll Get Your Cattle, Texan!"



BY SUNDOWN the following day, the Gonzales *vaqueros* had gathered another sizable bunch of JM-Connected cattle off the range. McVey tallied the bunch before throwing it in with the bunch gathered the preceding day, and the tally came to one hundred and eighty-five head. So he had repossessed three hundred and fifty-seven head at the Gonzales *rancho*, without any real trouble.

Brazos Addams was there, and said, when McVey completed the tally, "You're doing all right, McVey. How many more do you have to locate?"

McVey considered a moment. He had been paid for two hundred and ten head, by John Bristow. He had left Texas with a herd of twelve hundred head. He said, "I'm still short six hundred and thirty-three head, Brazos."

"You can't expect to get every last steer back."

"I know. I'll be satisfied if I recover five hundred head more."

Brazos nodded. "There's bound to be some loss. The Comanches probably lost

a few head in the Staked Plains. Trujillo and his *vaqueros* may have lost some more, trailing out of the Plains. We'll move south to Luis Garcia's *rancho*. Luis is Trujillo's brother-in-law, and he goes into the Llana Estacado with Trujillo to trade with the Indians. He's sure to have some of your stock. Trouble is, Garcia's ranch is about twenty-five miles from here. With your herd, it'll take two days to get there."

"Yeah," McVey said, "and I ought to move faster than that."

"I could take the herd off your hands."

"How?"

"I'll have my crew trail it to Crown range and hold it there," Brazos offered. "Meanwhile, we'll see what Garcia has got and drive what cattle we find there up through Trujillo's range. Maybe picking up some of your stock there. From Trujillo's range, we can move right into the Crown. Then you can throw all your cattle together, there on the Crown. By that time your man Shannon should be able to travel, and you can pick him up. And—" He eyed McVey shrewdly—"you can see Jan at the same time."

McVey studied him, suspicion naked in his eyes.

Brazos went on, "The shortest trail to Las Vegas and Fort Bascom is by way of the Crown Ranch. You'll have to go by way of Vegas anyway, to hit the trail to Raton Pass. That's the only way to Colorado."

"And I'll find my cattle on the Crown when I get there?"

"You have my word for it."

"Yeah. But is your word any good?"

Brazos grinned. "You're the most distrustful cuss I ever knew, McVey. Look—I'm going with you and that will make me your hostage, as well as Trujillo. Sure, you'll find your cattle when you get to the Crown."

McVey debated a moment, then nodded. "I'll take a chance," he said. "But I'll not turn my cattle over to your men until they're off this Gonzales range. We'll start moving them off tonight."

"Have it your way," Brazos said, and rode back toward his own camp.

McVey and his men started moving the herd after their evening meal. McVey let his riders do the driving. He rode with Jan Trujillo, keeping a close watch on the *comanchero*. The Crown crew followed, traveling with their chuckwagon. Nothing was seen of the *vaqueros* who had gathered the cattle off the Gonzales range, and McVey had seen nothing of Miguel Gonzales since the *ranchero* had made his one attempt to interfere.

By midnight they were off the range and trailing through the hills. There, right or wrong, McVey turned the herd over to the Crown hands. He had some misgivings as he watched them trail his cattle on through the hills, their yelps lifting above the bawling of the stock. One of the Crown riders was the hardcase, Matt Brock, and Brock had an ugly look of hatred in his eyes. McVey remembered how Brock had tried to kill him that day at the lake, and he wondered if he wasn't playing the fool in trusting Brazos and the Crown riders.

It was too late to back down, however, and with Brazos leading the way, he and Trujillo and the Texans rode south through the hills rimming the Gonzales range.

McVey swung close to Brazos, and said, "The day after I brought Tom Shannon to Crown, I met Jan riding in the hills. By a lake."

"Yeah. She told me."

"After she left, Matt Brock took a shot at me."

"Brock?" Gonzales showed surprise. "He was up there?"

McVey nodded. "So it wasn't you who sent him? Who was it—Bristow?"

BRAZOS was slow in replying. Finally he said, "Maybe it was. The Major knew you were hiding out there. I'd told him. Maybe he figured Jan would run into you, so sent Brock to look out for her. That was only sensible, since he didn't know how much to trust you. But if Brock tried to kill you, that was his idea—not Bristow's."

"Well, maybe you're right," McVey said, not too sure of it.

They went into camp three hours later, at a spot which Brazos said was within a short ride of Luis Garcia's range. The horses were off-saddled, guards were posted. McVey didn't spread out his blanket roll. He sat with his back to a boulder and dozed with his rifle across his knees. He kept waking every few minutes.

But the night passed without alarm. As a hostage, Juan Trujillo was worth his weight in gold.

Just after sun up, they rode down onto Luis Garcia's sparsely stocked valley range. Garcia turned out to be a young man, handsome in a swarthy fashion, and his resemblance to his sister, Senora Trujillo, was definite. He was anxious about Trujillo, and asked his health at great length. He looked like a sensible sort, and McVey found him to be that.

"*Si,*" Garcia said. "I will turn your cattle over to you. I heard that you were at the *rancho* of Miguel Gonzales to claim your stock." He smiled faintly. "My two *vaqueros* are already gathering the cattle. I will go give them a hand. Perhaps some of your riders, Senor McVey—?"

McVey could see no danger in it, so he sent six of his men out with Garcia. With the others, he went into camp within sight of Garcia's ranch buildings. He could see a woman there, and some small children. He thought of Jan then, tried to imagine what life would be like for him if she were his wife, the mother of his children. It was a pleasant picture his mind conjured up, and he wanted to make it come true.

But he looked at Trujillo, lying there on the ground with his head on his saddle. The *comanchero's* eyes were on him—always—and they were the eyes of a man filled with hate. Unless McVey kept him prisoner even after he had recovered his cattle, he would not dare remain in New Mexico to win Jan for his wife. Trujillo would be as dangerous as a poisonous snake, once he was freed.

Like the preceding day, this was a day of waiting for Jeff McVey. By mid-afternoon the gather was complete, and he had one hundred and thirty-seven head of JM-Connected cattle turned over to him by the amiable Luis Garcia.

McVey said, "There are about five hundred head more I've got to recover. Will I find them on Trujillo's range?"

Luis Garcia smiled. "*Eso es posible,*" he said.

They trailed the small herd through a narrow gap in the hills, and looked out across Trujillo's range. It was called Solana Valley, according to Brazos. The name suited, McVey reflected. Looking out across the wide valley, with the sun low against the mountains to the west, McVey had the feeling that he was seeing a golden land.

It was aglow because of the weakening sunlight; an illusion, of course. But the rolling grass flats were now a pale yellow, and the stream that twisted through the middle of the valley had a golden sheen. Even Trujillo's ranch buildings, a couple miles to the north, were the color of old gold at this hour of day. It was really a sunny place, and the valley was well-named.

A man should be content with such a home. McVey considered Trujillo a fool for letting his greed drive him away from it to follow the trails of the *comanchero* trade. McVey doubted that any amount of money could buy a finer range, and there was little else that a rancher needed beyond grass and water, which Trujillo had here in abundance.

The valley extended far south, as well as for several miles north, and what cattle McVey saw, scattered widely in small bunches, were lost in the immensity of grass. There were riders between the gap and the ranch headquarters. Several of these horsemen turned toward McVey's outfit, while the others rode north.

A long slope led from the gap to the valley floor, and the JM-Connected were driven down it. Six of the Texans handled the small herd. The others rode by pairs behind McVey and Brazos, who had Trujillo between them. Five *vaqueros* met them at the bottom of the slope, their

faces grim, but with a measure of uncertainty in their manner.

Reining in, McVey said, "Tell them what we're after, Trujillo."

THE *COMMANCHERO* was growing haggard. His face needed a razor, and his fancy clothes were beginning to turn shabby. He looked bitter to the core of him, and his hatred of McVey seemed greater than ever.

"I'll tell them nothing, *Tejano*!" He spat the words at McVey.

McVey's temper flared, but Brazos said, "Take it easy. I'll talk turkey to these hombres."

He gigged his horse, then leaned forward in the saddle with a scowl on his hearded face when he reined in directly in front of the *vaqueros*. He started bellowing in Spanish, speaking it like a native. The five riders squirmed uneasily under the outburst. They looked at Trujillo when Brazos finished, but the *comanchero* remained silent. They turned away then, headed north toward their headquarters at a lope.

Brazos looked at McVey with a grin. "I told them to go ask Senor Trujillo if they shouldn't save *el patron's* life by gathering up your cattle, McVey. You'll get some action now, of one sort or another. The threat of becoming a widow should scare the senora into letting us have our way. We may as well make camp. Too late now to roundup any cattle."

McVey grinned back at him. "I'll have to learn how to talk Mex," he said. "It gets results."

They went into camp by the side of the creek, and were eating supper when Senora Trujillo appeared. She rode up with two *vaqueros*, her side-saddle on a little roan mare. One of her companions helped her down and she swept past the Texans with her head high and holding her skirt as though afraid its hem might brush against one of them and become contaminated.

She looked at none of them except Jeff McVey, and called him some name that was beyond his limited knowledge of the native tongue to understand. The name, whatever it was, caused Brazos Addams to chuckle. Trujillo rose to meet his wife, his air that of a man who had suffered much and needed a woman's sympathy. McVey turned away as they embraced.

"Gets under your skin, does it?" Brazos asked.

"It shouldn't," McVey said. "A damn' peddler of guns to the Comanches. Why should I have any feeling for him?"

"They're a soft streak in you, McVey."

"You sure of that?"

Brazos nodded, smiling. "You've got some plumb decent feelings," he said. "That's why I'm for you. The woman will put her *vaqueros* to work for you in the morning. You'll see." He nudged McVey with his elbow. "But don't let her get close to you, bucko. She's likely try to stick a knife between your ribs." He walked off, chuckling.

Brazos was right, for when Senora Trujillo left her husband, she said to McVey, "You will get your cattle, Texan." And she looked as though she *would* like to stick a knife in him.

CHAPTER XIV

An Hidalgo Loses Face

THE TRUJILLO crew was a big one and, as Jeff McVey well knew, there were no better cowhands than Mexican *vaqueros*. But the work of cutting McVey's JM-Connected cattle out of the Trujillo herd went on at a snail's pace. In two days, the Trujillo riders turned only one hundred and thirty-one head of cattle over to the Texans.

Something was wrong. McVey grew uneasy.

Either few of his cattle were mixed in with the other stock on the Trujillo range, or the *vaqueros* were loafing on the job.

As he saw their sly grins when they brought the second small bunch to the Texans' camp, McVey knew they were stalling. When he saw mockery in the eyes of Juan Trujillo, he was sure of it beyond all doubt.

He talked it over with Charlie Doyle and Brazos Addams. They agreed with McVey. The *vaqueros* were taking their own good time to do the job, and they could have but one motive—to delay the Texans' departure from the Trujillo range. Something was being planned.

Charlie Doyle said, "I'll take some of our boys out in the morning. Maybe we can hustle them along a little."

McVey shook his head. "We'd only be playing into their hands. They'd jump you as soon as you got away from the camp."

Old Brazos nodded agreement to that. "Don't divide your crew, McVey. Leave this to me. I'll have a talk with Trujillo. If he's planning something, he'll brag about it—to me."

He sauntered away. Playing it cagey, he stopped to talk to several of the Texans lounging about the camp before approaching Trujillo who had spent the past two days by a boulder at the edge of the creek.

It was sundown. The *vaqueros* had ridden off toward the ranch headquarters after delivering the day's small gather. Cole Ambers was busy rustling up supper for the crew, Tip Harmon lending him a hand. The surrounding range was again suffused with its golden glow.

It was not until after the evening meal had been eaten that Brazos left Trujillo. Then McVey walked with him away from the others. They watched two of the Texans riding slowly about the small JM-Connected herd in a broad hollow.

McVey said, "You get him to talk, Brazos?"

The Crown man nodded, grinned. "It was too good for him to keep," he said. "They're up to something, all right. His wife planned it. Senora Trujillo sent a rider to Fort Bascom asking for soldiers to come here—to round up a bunch of bandits. You and your men, McVey."

McVey frowned, remembering his talk with the Las Vegas lawyer, Hernandez Otera. The lawyer had said that the *comancheros* might use the Territorial lawmen and the Army against him. McVey swore under his breath.

"What do you think, Brazos? Will the commanding officer at Bascom send troops?"

"I wouldn't bet the soldiers won't come."

"To protect a no-good *comanchero?*"

"To you Texans, the *comancheros* are criminals," Brazos said. "Here in the Territory, they're respectable citizens. There's no law against the trade. In fact, they had licenses from the Indian Bureau to carry on. I've heard some of the Army officers are in cahoots with them. It could be true. Yeah, McVey, I'd gamble the soldiers will show up, sooner or later."

"And they'll try to make me give up my cattle, eh?"

"They'll free Trujillo, at least. And then you're a goner."

McVey said savagely, "I should have put a slug in him the first time I saw him. But I've still got him for a hostage—and the soldiers won't find him when they show up." He thought for a moment, before he said: "His wife came to see him last night and the night before. She'll probably show up tonight. It's time the senora has a scare thrown into her, too."

He turned back to the camp, got the rope off his saddle, and strode off to the rope corral.

The woman came alone, looking as contemptuous of the Texans as ever. It was just growing dark when she arrived. At first she didn't notice that her husband was one of the two mounted men before her. She looked for him over by the boulder at the creek's edge. When she did see Trujillo on his horse, with his hands tied to the saddle-horn, alarm spread over her attractive dark face.

She swung over to Trujillo, asked him an excited question.

McVEY watched her narrowly, not liking to frighten her, yet knowing

she was as much his enemy as Trujillo himself. The other Texans and Brazos Addams gathered around. Charlie Doyle was the other mounted man, and he was holding the reins of Trujillo's horse. Trujillo answered his wife's question with a shrug. She swung her horse around to face McVey.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded. "What are you doing to my husband now?"

"I'm sending him away before the soldiers get here," McVey told her. "I have no choice. The soldiers would free him, then he would turn his *vaqueros* loose on me and my men. Your husband will be taken far enough away so that the soldiers can't find him. He'll be safe enough unless there's trouble. In that case, he will be shot." He turned to Charlie Doyle. "All right, Charlie," he said. "Get started."

Doyle nodded and turned away, taking Trujillo with him.

The senora would have followed, but McVey caught her roan mare by the bridle.

"That's not the way to save him, senora. All I want is my cattle, and to get safely out of the Territory. When I get that, you'll get your husband back. And you can hurry it up by seeing to it that I get my cattle before the soldiers get here."

Senora Trujillo no longer looked at him with hate. It was fear that was in her eyes now. And there was a sudden look of defeat in her actions. Her shoulders sagged. He lower lip quivered.

"You will get your cattle," she repeated.

"Before the soldiers get here?"

"Yes. Tomorrow."

"I hope the lady keeps her word," McVey said, and let go of her horse.

The *vaqueros* did better the following day. They gathered two hundred and forty-two head of JM-Connected cattle, turning them over to McVey late in the afternoon. Brazos Addams said, "Better stop at that. You're crowding your luck hard enough. One more day, and the soldiers may show up."

McVey nodded. He was satisfied. He had been paid for or recovered all but one hundred and twenty-three head, and he was willing to accept the loss. The important thing now was to trail his herd safely out of New Mexico Territory, get it beyond reach of the Trujillo crowd. He wouldn't be safe, he knew, until he was on his way through Raton Pass.

They were on the move by sundown, trailing north, and passed the ranch buildings as darkness thickened over the range. Not long after, they drove the small herd past the cluster of adobe huts at the north end of the range and on through the narrow cut in the rock bluffs. They swung northwest, on Brazos Addam's say-so, and by midnight, hazing the cattle along at a fast pace, broke out of some low hills onto what Brazos said was Crown range.

"How far to where your men are holding the rest of my cattle?" McVey asked.

"Half a dozen miles," Brazo replied. "I told them to move the cattle plenty far from Trujillo's range, to be on the safe side. We'll make it to there by sunup." He eyed McVey curiously. "What about Trujillo?"

"Charlie Doyle will bring him along, soon as it's daylight."

"How soon are you turning him loose?"

"When my herd is traveling Dick Wootton's toll road through Raton Pass. After that, he'll have one tough time getting at me."

Brazos was silent for a time. Then he murmured, "There's something else—the girl."

"Yeah. Jan. I'll see her tomorrow, Brazos."

"*Bueno*," said Brazos, seeming satisfied.

They sighted the Crown chuckwagon and the second part of McVey's herd at daybreak. Only four of the Crown hands besides the cook were guarding the herd. The others evidently had been recalled to headquarters by Major Bristow. The four were eating breakfast, and McVey noticed at once that Matt Brock was not among them.

The Texans threw the cattle from the Trujillo range and the Garcia range in with those from Miguel Gonzales' *rancho*.

They off-saddled their mounts, horses that McVey was becoming concerned about and regarded with a troubled eye. They had been ridden hard and long, all the way from Texas. Most of them were in poor condition. And there was still a long trail ahead of them, to Colorado.

McVey asked Brazos about buying a string of broncs, and the Crown man said, "We can't spare any horses, but I'll rustle some up for you at a fair price. By tomorrow, at the lastest."

"All right," McVey said. "But make sure it's no later than tomorrow."

BRAZOS rode off toward Crown headquarters with the four men who had been guarding the herd, and a little later the Crown chuckwagon pulled out. It was mid-morning when Charlie Doyle appeared, bringing Juan Trujillo with him. As further proof that fresh mounts were needed, Doyle's claybank had gone lame.

"Any trouble while you were in the hills?" McVey asked.

"None at all," Doyle said. "Except that I'm hungry as a Pecos bear."

He off-saddled his horse, then headed for Cole Ambers' cookfire.

Trujillo dropped from his horse, and for the first time McVey saw signs that the *comanchero* knew he had lost his chance to even the score. Trujillo's face was haggard. His eyes were dull now, no longer smoldering with hatred. He ignored McVey. Sinking to the ground, he cradled his face in his arms. Had the man's sins been anything less than trading guns to the Indians, McVey would have felt some pity for him. A beaten man wasn't a pleasant thing to see.

McVey stripped bridle and saddle off Trujillo's horse.

John Bristow rode up to the camp at noon. His manner was friendly. He greeted McVey with a smile. Yet the Texan felt that he needed to be on guard against the man. Perhaps it was Bristow's eyes than made him distrustful. There was a chill, calculative look in them. It was as though the Major's smile was a mask, and the eyes showing through it revealed the actual man. A man of secretive nature, of devious thinking.

Bristow said heartily, "Well, you've done it, McVey. I didn't believe you could, but now I'm convinced." He glanced at Trujillo. "He'll never be the same. You've taken the heart out of him."

"I'm letting him off easy, Bristow."

"Yes, I suppose you are. Another man might have killed him."

"And he deserves it," McVey said. "I hate his guts. I'd like to see him and every other *comanchero* strung up. Did Brazos tell you that Senora Trujillo sent a rider to Bascom for soldiers?"

Bristow nodded, took out a cigar. After he had lighted up, he said, "Trail north across Crown range, then head east until you hit the Raton Pass road. I doubt if the Army will chase you far. Brazos said he's going to find some horses for you. He'll get them from the Barton brothers, over at Sarbo Creek. I told him to buy them in my name. I'll settle with the Bartons later. You can pay me whatever the broncs cost."

McVey nodded, wondering if he was not wrong in being distrustful of this man. "I'm obliged to you. Brazos and the others have been a big help."

"I'm glad of that," Bristow said. "It was what Janice wanted. You'll stop by to see her before you leave?"

"Yes. If you have no objections."

Bristow smiled faintly. "I have no objections," he said, and turned his horse away.

McVey looked after him, still wondering what to make of Major John Bristow.

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CHAPTER XV

Duel in the Dark

ALL McVEY could do to make himself presentable was to take a bath in the nearby creek and scrape the stubble of beard off his face. It was late afternoon when he left the camp, fairly certain by then that no soldiers would show up today. The Crown range was empty of riders, all the way to the hills separating it from the Trujillo range. And that was the direction from which the soldiers would come. They would go to the Trujillo Ranch to get the details of what was happening, then follow his trail.

He rode west to the Crown headquarters, arriving there just as the hands were going into the cookshack for supper. Brazos was there, and he told McVey, "The Bartons are delivering twenty head of good saddle stock here in the morning. I'll bring the broncs over to your camp as soon as they get here."

"Thanks, Brazos. Shannon still in your house?"

"Yeah. But he's kind of busy right now."

"Busy? Busy doing what?"

Brazos grinned, said, "Go find out," and went into the cookshack.

McVey rode over to the ranch boss' small adobe house, dismounted, and heard a woman's voice. The door stood open, and he saw Louise Bristow inside. McVey rapped his knuckles on the door as he entered.

The woman looked around, said somewhat embarrassedly, "It's McVey, Tom."

Tom Shannon sat in an armchair that hadn't been in the dobe when McVey had visited it previously. Obviously it had been brought over from the main house. Shannon was eating from a tray on his lap, a tray which held real china and sterling silver. He even had a linen napkin tucked into his shirt front. Tom grinned. He, too, looked a bit embarrassed.

McVey's smile said that he knew what was going on here. It was obvious that Louise Bristow was taking care of Shannon. She'd brought him his meals from the ranchhouse kitchen. McVey nodded to her, seeing the flush staining her cheeks. He turned to Shannon.

"How are you doing, Tom?"

"Well, I'm kind of ashamed to say it, Jeff, but I'm not myself."

"You look a little on the pale side."

"I've been sick as a dog, Jeff. I can't get my strength back."

McVey nodded. "It'll take a little more time," he said. "We're heading for Colorado tomorrow. You can follow us when you're able to ride. I'll meet you in Pueblo, after we've sold the herd." He saw Shannon's look of embarrassement deepen, noticed the man's quick glance at Louise. "But if you're making other plans," Jeff added, "it's all right with me. I'll pay you your wages, and we'll be even-Steven."

"It's like this, Jeff," Shannon said. "Bristow has offered me a job here, and—well, there's nothing for me back in Texas. Nothing but mighty unhappy memories. I like this country. And it'd be a fresh start for me. One I need."

McVey glanced at Louise Bristow, marveling. Here were two people who had discovered that they belonged together. A man who had been haunted by the death of his wife and son. A woman who, when McVey had seen her before, had seemed to be the most unhappy of women. They had fallen in love, and he was glad for them. As for Bristow's offering Tom Shannon a job, that was a fine gesture. There was still no understanding the man.

McVey said, "I understand, Tom. I'm glad something good came out of this ugly business for you."

He dug into his money-belt, paid Shannon his wages and added a hundred-dollar bonus that brought a pleased smile to the man's pale, haggard face. McVey said that he would leave so that Shannon could

finish his supper, then shook hands with him and turned to the door.

Louise Bristow said, almost anxiously, "You'll see Jan, won't you, Jeff?"

"Yes, of course."

Jan was waiting for him in the doorway of the big house, having seen him ride in, and her face was aglow. She reached out her hands to him, saying, "It's worked out for you, hasn't it, Jeff? You've got back your cattle!"

"And without causing any trouble," he replied, holding her hands. "You see, Jan? Most of the things we fear never harm us." He searched her face, looked into her eyes. He could see nothing of her deep-rooted fears now; she showed nothing but her pleasure over his being there. "I'll start for Colorado as soon as Brazos gets me some horses. I'll turn Trujillo loose once I reach Raton Pass. I won't dare come back here, because of him. So I've got to talk to you now, Jan."

HER SMILE wavered. She revealed something new—shyness.

"Come inside, Jeff." She held onto his hand, led him into the parlor.

When she faced him again, it was to come into his arms.

His lips found hers as his arms tightened about her. He was rough with her, because of his quickly inflamed desires, but that was the way Jan wanted it. Her arms tightened about his neck, and she strained against him with a fierce possessiveness.

So they stood when John Bristow entered the room.

They moved apart, faced him. Jan's immediate embarrassment flooded her face with rosy color, then drained it and left her pale. McVey felt no such confusion. He faced Bristow with a stiff look of defiance.

And said, "Bristow, I'm taking Jan away with me."

Bristow nodded, smiling. "So I see," he said. "I'll miss her. On the other hand, I accept the inevitable. I knew from the first time she spoke of you that this would happen. It's right and good. She's reached the age where she should think of marriage. And I can find no fault with her choice. You're a man of strength and character, McVey, and—Well, I congratulate you."

He offered his hand.

McVey grasped it after a moment's hesitation, once more astonished by this man. "I thought there would be some objections," he said, smiling.

"I have only one objection," Bristow said. "I object to you planning to take her along while you're trailing cattle. While there's still a risk that you'll have trouble with Trujillo's men. I don't want her endangered, McVey."

"Nor do I."

"I suggest that my sister and I take Janice to Las Vegas, and put her on the stage," Bristow went on. "Or we could travel to Colorado with her." He smiled faintly. "I'd like to be present when she is married. After all, it's my duty to give her away in marriage. And I think Louise would like to be present." He turned to Jan. "How do you feel about it, Janice?"

Her eyes clouded for a moment, then she said, "I'd like you and Louise to be with me—with Jeff and me. It's up to Jeff, though. If he wants me to go with him and his men, I—Well, I'm not afraid."

"Of course, you're not afraid," Bristow told her. "But I'd rather you wouldn't take the risk." He looked questioningly at McVey. "How about you, Jeff?"

McVey nodded. "You're right. I'll meet you in Colorado, at Pueblo. . . ."

It grew dark early. Leaden clouds had blotted out the sunset, and as McVey rode back to camp, a drizzle of rain began to fall. He rode slowly through the wet darkness, full of conflicting thoughts. Because of Jan, there was a fine, warm glow inside him. Because of John Bristow, he was uneasy in his mind. The man had accepted too casually Jan's decision to marry him.

It couldn't be, McVey reflected, that he was wrong about Bristow wanting her for himself. There was something wrong in Bristow's behavior, but for the life of him, McVey couldn't tell what it was. But it

worried him.

He topped a rise of ground and saw the welcoming glow of the campfire. He reined in, peering through the darkness toward his loosely held cattle on their bed-ground. Two of his men were riding slowly about the herd.

Then McVey saw a third rider, between himself and the herd.

This rider was leading a spare horse. He reined in somewhat closer to the cattle than to McVey. He had been headed toward the camp which was some distance beyond the bed-ground, so McVey took it for granted that the man was one of his Texans. But he couldn't imagine what the fellow was doing. Suddenly he saw a glint of metal.

And the muzzle flash as a gunshot crashed!

The rider cut loose with a wild yell, then fired two more shots. His reason for being there was now clear to McVey. And he succeeded in his scheme. For in moments the entire herd was up and running, in wild stampede. The two night herders shouted, and whirled after the spooked cattle. At the camp, the other Texans yelled and milled around as they grabbed up saddles and ran for their mounts.

"Stampede!"

The yells of the hands rose above the thunderous pounding of hoofs as nearly nine hundred longhorn cattle, racing along like a frenzied Juggernaut, disappeared through the murky darkness.

IT HAD ALL happened so quickly that McVey was still gripped by surprise in a sort of mental paralysis. Then he heard the rider who had started the stampede laugh crazily, and savage rage swept through him. He jerked his rifle from its boot, kicked spurs to his horse.

At the same instant, the other rider turned toward McVey.

And, uttering a startled yelp, fired at him.

McVey drove his gray straight at the muzzle flashes of the man's gun.

McVey heard the shriek of the slugs, but bullets bothered him no more at the moment than some pesty insect would have done. He was crazy mad, too mad to know fear. He jerked his Henry to his shoulder, drove a shot at the shadowy shape of the rider. It missed, and drew another shot from the man.

This time the flash showed him the face of the rider—the broad, tough face of Matt Brock.

McVey yelled a curse, fired again. His galloping horse swerved to avoid colliding with Brock's mount and the spare horse. As he whipped past Brock, McVey saw him going down. Brock's horse had taken the Henry's slug.

McVey was a dozen yards past the man when he reined the spooked gray about. He saw Brock running with the spare horse, leading it by its reins and keeping it between himself and McVey. It was the sort of trick that McVey had used when Brock had tried to kill him at the mountain lake.

He swore again, savagely, and went after his quarry. He was sure Brock's gun was empty, or nearly so. The man had fired five shots, maybe six. And unless he had a second gun—McVey came up with the led horse, but Brock ducked under its neck and for a long moment that was all McVey saw of him. The Texan jerked his horse about, so abruptly that the animal reared.

Brock's gun roared again, and McVey's horse, creased by the slug, shrieked with pain and terror. Brock fired again, and this time the slug came so close that McVey imagined he felt the breath of it. Brock did have a second gun, and he was somehow hidden now, while McVey was an easy target. McVey dropped from saddle, and since his horse was running, he lost his balance as he hit the ground and went sprawling. Another slug probed for him.

He lay still, except to lever another cartridge from the Henry's underbarrel tube into its firing chamber. He heard nothing of Brock, and the man's gun was silent now. He suddenly realized that all his men had ridden out after the stampeding

cattle, that he and Matt Brock were alone. In a private hell of hate. And there would be no escape from it for one of them.

He lay on his stomach in the wet grass, his grip on the Henry viselike. He raised his head, peered about, seeing his gray horse not far off, but not the animal Brock had been leading. He knew the reason now for that spare horse. Brock had brought it for someone—for Trujillo. He'd stampeded the herd so that Trujillo would have a chance to escape.

"Brock! You Brock, damn you!" McVey shouted at the top of his lungs.

Brock's reply came from surprisingly near, from off to his left, and it was a taunting one. "Come and get me, McVey—and I'll put a bullet through your guts!" He was flat on the ground, hidden by the high grass.

McVey squirmed around so that he faced the man's general position. He began crawling forward, snake-flat to the ground. After moving for perhaps six feet, he halted and readied his rifle. He heard a rasping sound, Brock's hurried breathing. He listened to it for a moment, then squeezed the Henry's trigger.

A wild scream echoed his shot, then Brock was up and running—running in the lurching way that a drunk would run. A drunk or a hit man. McVey leaped up and shouted, "Here, Brock—here!" The man halted, swung toward him, and both men fired at the same instant. Matt Brock staggered, then his knees buckled and pitched him forward onto his face.

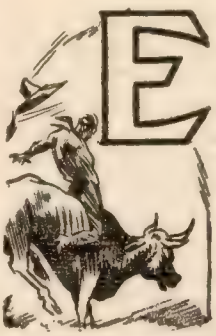
McVey didn't go to him. He knew that Brock was dead without investigating. He whirled and ran to his horse. It was still badly spooked and shied away, but he finally caught its reins and swung to the saddle. He rode toward the only thing that showed in the rainy dark, the campfire. His entire crew was gone, and so was Trujillo.

It was possible that one of his men, Charlie Doyle perhaps, had thought to take Trujillo with him. McVey thought otherwise, however. The first thought of Doyle and the others would be for the herd. Trujillo was gone. That was something McVey knew.

And he knew, too, what that meant for him.

CHAPTER XVI

Comanchero's Ultimatum



EXCEPT FOR the loss of his hostage, McVey suffered no real damage because of Matt Brock's trickery. The herd had stampeded in the direction it was to be headed when thrown on the trail again, north across Crown range. It was intact, except for a few critters that had dropped behind and were easily rounded up when daylight came.

The crew had managed to overtake the herd, turn its leaders, get it milling. And so they were several miles farther along the trail to Colorado.

The light rain was still falling at daybreak. It soaked the Texans, most of whom were poorly clothed, to the skin and chilled them to the marrow of their bones. But in another way it was kind to them. It was a screen, McVey and all of them knew, that might hide them from whoever came hunting them—the soldiers from Bascom, Trujillo and his *vaqueros*. With the day so hazy, the range of vision was restricted. And McVey believed that if he could elude his enemies during the day and the coming night, he might have a chance of escaping them entirely.

He did not wait for the horses Brazos had promised to deliver, but sent one of his men to Crown headquarters to tell the range boss to follow the herd north with the broncs.

It was mid-afternoon of that bleak day when Brazos and two of his riders arrived with the broncs, loose herding them. McVey looked them over with an expert eye, agreed with Brazos that they were

fine animals. They certainly looked good in comparison with the Texans' done-in mounts. Now that he had a remuda, McVey named Chris Wyatt as wrangler and told him to give every man in the crew a fresh mount. He shifted his own saddle from his gray to a stocky zebra-striped dun.

The price was fifty dollars a head. McVey paid it and received a bill of sale from Brazos. Then he told the Crown man about the stampede and Trujillo's escape, and that Matt Brock was dead and lying somewhere in the wet grass near their old camp.

Brazos swore. "I was wondering where Brock was, not seeing him this morning," he said. "So you killed him in a shoot-out, did you?"

"When you get his body, look around for his guns," McVey said. "You'll find empty loads in them. He did a lot of shooting. Nobody can say that he wasn't killed in a fair fight—that he asked for."

"He'd hated your guts ever since that day you first showed up on the Crown and whipped him. No man had ever got the best of him in a fight till you came along. He downed you with that branding-iron, but he still knew you were the better man. So he hated you, and was waiting to even the score."

"Just so it was like that."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Brazos, I still don't trust your boss," McVey said. "That was smart figuring—stampede the herd to help Trujillo escape. Was Matt Brock smart enough to figure that out himself?"

Brazos was a long time answering, then he said reluctantly, "I don't know. It did take some tricky figuring. I don't want to think that the Major put him up to it, but —Well, I just don't know."

They talked a little longer, Brazos telling McVey about the trail ahead and explaining the shortest route to reach the road from Las Vegas to Raton Pass. They shook hands then, Brazos saying, "Luck to you, McVey," and riding off toward Crown headquarters.

The Texans trailed a dozen miles that day, and were far beyond Crown range when they watered the herd and threw it onto a bed-ground. The rain had stopped, but the sky remained clouded and the night was sooty black. McVey had Cole Ambers kill his cookfire after rustling up the evening meal. After a couple hours of sleep, McVey saddled a fresh mount and rode for miles along the outfit's back trail.

He saw no signs of other riders along it. . . .

It was mid-morning, with the herd trailing through a broad valley, when a warning shout lifted. It was Chris Wyatt, hazing the remuda along, who shouted, and he gestured wildly toward their back-trail. McVey swung his horse about, saw a big bunch of riders pouring into the valley through a gap in the hills.

McVey grabbed out his Colt and fired three quick shots into the air. His riders, scattered about the strung-out herd, abandoned the cattle, to gather about him. They could now see the big sombreros and gaudy serapes of the oncoming riders, and knew they were Trujillo's men, perhaps with the *comanchero* himself leading them. There were nearly fifty riders in the band.

McVEY LOOKED at his own men, sixteen of them, and knew that they didn't like the odds any more than he did. He said, "Boys, this won't be any picnic. If any of you want no part of it, run for it now—while there's still a chance. I won't hold it against you."

Tip Harmon said, "We didn't come all this way to run out on you now."

McVey saw that Tip spoke for all of them. He smiled wryly, looked around to see if the terrain offered any sort of cover. There was a stretch of rock and brush not far off, and he turned toward it.

The Trujillo riders were almost within rifle range when McVey and his men dismounted and took cover. The Mexicans halted as the Texans, some crouching behind rocks and some prone on the ground, leveled and cocked their rifles. McVey saw Trujillo out there, and cursed when

he recognized the *comanchero.*

Shortly a rider on a pinto came forward, brandishing his rifle over his head. There was a white cloth tied to the muzzle of the rifle. A flag of truce. McVey rose, gestured to the man to come in close. The *vaquero* halted a short distance from the Texans' guns.

"*Tejanos!*" he shouted. "Listen, *Tejanos!*"

"We're listening, hombre!" McVey yelled. "Say something!"

"*Tejanos,* you may go your way and take the cattle," the *vaquero* shouted. "Senor Trujillo wants only your leader. Turn the man McVey over to us, and you may go. Otherwise, all will die!"

McVey made no reply to that, but looked at his men.

Lanky Charlie Doyle answered, yelling, "Go tell Trujillo to come get McVey if he wants him bad! Go tell him, hombre!"

The *vaquero* didn't argue. He rode back to his companions.

Trujillo did not make the mistake of riding into the Texans' guns. He deployed his men in a wide circle about McVey's position, and had them dismount. They had little cover, but by keeping low to the ground they made difficult targets of themselves. They began a sniping fire, and there was never a minute from then on, through the remainder of the morning and on into the afternoon, that their harassing fire let up.

They fired a dozen shots to one from McVey and his men, but the Texans were conserving their ammunition and firing only when there was a chance at a target. To avoid a concentration of fire on one target, McVey scattered his men among the rocks and brush and gave each a definite section of the circle to shoot at.

There were men hit. Tip Harmon was wounded in the shoulder, and a man named Carter died with a bullet through his throat. On the Trujillo side, as near as McVey could tell, three men were killed and at least one was wounded. There was no wind, and powdersmoke hung in a haze over the field.

Aside from the steady booming of the guns, there was no sound at all. Both sides fought in a grim silence. If there was any sound from McVey's men, it was an occasional curse when a shot missed—and most of their shots were misses, but made for the most part in silence.

They were a sober lot, wholly without bravado. They were fighting for their lives, each man for his own life, not just for McVey's. They had chosen to fight, and now Trujillo would show them no quarter.

And when nightfall came—That was something McVey didn't want to think about. Under cover of darkness, the Mexicans would crawl close and rake his position with such a heavy fire that his crew would be decimated. They would down some of the attackers, of course. But not enough. The odds were too great against them.

He watched the sun, McVey did. And it seemed to him that never before had it dropped so swiftly toward the mountains in the west. It would soon be gone. Then there would be dusk, and darkness. He tried not to think of it, but the truth was there in his mind. He wouldn't see tomorrow's sun. Nor would any of his men.

It seemed incredible that so many men should die, but they were Texans, and this was New Mexico Territory. They were trapped in a hostile land, and they had ridden into the trap with their eyes open. McVey thought bleakly of Jan, of what his life might have been but for Matt Brock.

There was no longer hatred of Trujillo in him, nor anger. Only a sadness such as he had not known since once or twice during the war when he had been caught in a trap much like this one. Then he had been lucky; he had managed to come out alive, thought not all of his comrades had been so fortunate. This time however, in his own private war, there was no escape.

THE MEXICANS were sure of that, too. As dusk thickened, they stopped shooting and yelled taunts at McVey and his men. They were now waiting for

darkness, confident of victory.

In another hour they would crawl close, their guns blazing at short range.

McVey's hands were wet with sweat as he gripped his Henry rifle which, in a showdown like this, would not shoot fast enough.

As darkness came, McVey darted from one of his men to the other and told each one, "We won't have one chance in a thousand of lasting through the night. If you see a way to get out of here alive, once they close in, take it—and luck to you!"

He ended up with Charlie Doyle. The lanky Texan was peering out across the valley.

"Jeff, those soldiers you've been worried about," Doyle said. "They're coming."

McVey rose and stared into the thickening gloom. He could see something moving out there, but he couldn't make out what. He said, "Charlie, your eyes are sharper than mine. Here's hoping you're not wrong!" He jerked his rifle to his shoulder and opened fire at the positions of the *comanchero* crowd. His men joined in, then Trujillo and his men started shooting aagin.

McVey wanted the soldiers to know what was happening. He didn't want them to have any doubts about the situation. They had to know that the Trujillo crowd had started the fight, had attacked him and his men. He was hoping that the cavalrymen would stop the battle. After a minute of wild shooting, McVey shouted at his men, "Hold your fire! That's enough!"

The racket of gunfire suddenly ended, on both sides, and in the abrupt quiet voices began to shout back and forth out there in the darkness. Some sort of a parley was going on between the *comancheros* and the soldiers.

Then after some minutes a voice with a ring of authority to it called demandingly:

"McVey! You, McVey! This is Lieutenant Gorham from Fort Bascom. Hold your fire. I'm coming in!"

Cavalry in motion had a sound all its own. Saddle leather creaked, bit chains jingled, sabers and accoutrements rattled. The detail loomed through the darkness, the officer in the lead and a sergeant and a dozen troopers in pairs following him. McVey stepped out to meet them, his rifle in the bend of his arm. Lieutenant Gorham reined in, dismounted.

"All right, McVey," he said. "What's your story?"

"I can tell it in a few words, Lieutenant," McVey replied. "I was crossing the Staked Plains with a herd of cattle I hoped to sell in Colorado. A Comanche war party attacked, and while my crew and I fought them, another bunch made off with my herd. I lost my remuda, too. So I came to New Mexico later, figuring I could get my cattle back once they reached the *comancheros*. I've done what I set out to do. And this bunch of *comancheros* doesn't like it. They're out to murder me and my men. That's the whole story."

"Senor Trujillo claims you seized him, held him as a hostage."

"He was my guest."

CHAPTER XVII

Real Enemy in the Open!

LIEUTENANT GORHAM surprised McVey by laughing. He was no spit-and-polish martinet, but a rough-and-ready frontier soldier. His uniform was untidy, his mustache straggly. He was past thirty, old for a lieutenant; but the peacetime U. S. Army was a small one, with promotions slow, and McVey knew he was dealing with an old campaigner who might well be no man to be bound by rules and regulations.

Gorham said, "Trujillo wants you arrested on all sorts of charges."

"One of my men is dead, because of him," McVey broke in. "Another wounded."

"That's regrettable. But your losses are light, considering the risks you ran. I was going to say, McVey, that my instructions are to restore order in this part of the country. And I'm not going to arrest anyone. It would do no good to take Trujillo into custody. He has too many influential friends. On the other hand, I hate the guts of him and his kind." The lieutenant's smile had been replaced by a scowl. "Ten days ago, McVey, I had a brush with a band of Comanches. They were armed with trade guns—maybe guns obtained from Trujillo. I lost three good men."

McVey said nothing. But he knew now that this veteran lieutenant was on his side, not Trujillo's.

Gorham continued, "I've given Trujillo thirty minutes to start back to his ranch. If he's not gone by then, I'm going to turn my carbines on him and his men. But I've a hunch that he won't force me to do that."

The lieutenant's hunch was right.

There was a drumming of hoofs out in the darkness, a muttering of angry Mexican voices. The sound receded, and finally faded in the distance.

Trujillo and his *vaqueros* were gone. . . .

As the sun rose, the Texans trailed their herd on through the valley. And as their shouts lifted above the bawling of the cattle, Lieutenant Gorham and his detail turned south to make sure that the Trujillo crowd returned to their own range.

The sun rose bright and warm, and now, with the way open to Colorado, the land no longer seemed hostile to Jeff McVey. There was but one thing that tarnished his victory—the death of his rider, Sam Carter, who now lay buried in a lonely grave. But it could have been worse. He might have lost more of his men. Only the arrival of the soldiers had saved him and his whole crew. And the strange, the ironic part of that was that it had been Trujillo's wife who had sent for them!

There was gold in Colorado, gold for Texas beef. And Jan was coming to Colorado to marry him. The future looked good to Jeff McVey, as he rode point on his plodding longhorn herd.

Then at mid-afternoon a rider from the Crown Ranch overtook the outfit.

He was a Mexican, and McVey remembered seeing him in the bunch that Brazos Addams had brought to the Gonzales *rancho*. He rode up to McVey, handed him a folded paper, then swung his horse about and headed back without waiting. McVey's hands were shaking as he unfolded the paper. He was certain that this concerned Jan, and that something was wrong.

The small, neat handwriting was a woman's. And the signature was "Louise Bristow." McVey's face turned rocky as he read:

Jeff: My brother now refuses to let Jan leave the Crown Ranch to meet you in Colorado. He never intended to let her marry you. Come to the place where you left Crown range with your herd. Jan and I will be there tonight to go with you. Wait there. Don't come to Crown headquarters.

Louise Bristow.

McVey swore, then called to Charlie Doyle.

He turned back toward the Crown after telling Charlie to take over as trail boss, riding faster than he needed to reach the edge of the range by nightfall. There was anger in him. But no surprise. Somehow, this didn't surprise him at all. In a corner of his mind, he had always distrusted everything John Bristow said or did. This proved that his hunch about the man was right.

Sure, he told himself, Bristow had made a big show of giving him a helping hand. He'd been forced into that, by Jan. She had begged him to help, and if he'd refused her, he would have made her hate him. Wanting her as he did, Bristow couldn't afford to have her turn against him. So he had gone through the pretense of doing as she wanted, but all the while he had been looking for a way to be rid of Jeff McVey without Jan knowing that he planned it.

McVEY knew this: he had been a marked man from the moment

Bristow had learned that Jan was in love with him. But nothing Bristow had planned had panned out. There was more McVey now knew: Bristow had sent a warning to Juan Trujillo so that the *comanchero* could set that trap at San Alejandro, he had sent Matt Brock to kill McVey that day he and Jan had met at the mountain lake, and he had sent Brock to stampede the JM-Connected herd so that Trujillo could escape and, seeking revenge, do away with McVey—for John Bristow.

But McVey had had the devil's own luck. Even at the very end, when he had lost hope, the soldiers who had been summoned to bring about his downfall had aided him. And now Bristow, aware that his schemes had failed, no longer kept up the pretense of assenting to the marriage of Jan and McVey. He had stepped between them, willing to have her hate him, but not to have her leave the Crown Ranch.

McVey couldn't guess what steps Bristow had taken to keep Jan from starting for Colorado. The man couldn't be holding her at the ranch by force, or Louise wouldn't be able to bring her to meet him tonight. But whatever Bristow was trying to do, he wasn't getting away with it.

If Jan and Louise didn't meet him, McVey told himself, he would go to the ranch for them. Bristow and his talk of taking Jan to Colorado, of being present when she married McVey, of giving her away —McVey called himself a fool for falling for such talk.

It was past sundown when he approached Crown range. There was a stretch of rough country bordering the range. A malpais of craggy bluffs, deep gullies, rocks, and brush. McVey rode through it until he could see out across Crown range, then reined in and took out makings. He saw a few small bunches of cattle in the distance, but no riders.

It was quiet there, and as he rolled his smoke, McVey heard nothing but the wheezy blowing of his winded dun. But then another horse, somewhere off to one side. The unseen animal stamped and switched, and rattled its bit chains.

McVey needed no other warning. He dropped his cigarette, grabbed his rifle, dropped from saddle. A gunshot crashed, and McVey felt as though a red-hot branding-iron had been jabbed against his right side. He staggered, then recovered his balance and darted through a patch of brush. The gun roared again, and he almost let out a scream as the hot iron jabbed again, this time in his left thigh.

He went down, sprawling on his face. But he heaved over the instant he landed, and the third slug struck the ground beside him. He scrambled up, ran lurchingly, his face agonized. Again the hidden gun blasted. The slug tore at his shirt. His wounded leg buckled, and he pitched forward among a cluster of rocks. He dragged himself into them, gasping for breath and drenched with sweat. And bleeding from his wounds.

The gun fired again, and there was a shriek from McVey's horse. He could see the dun from where he lay. It fell dead in its tracks, shot through the head. The ambusher had made sure that his victim couldn't escape. McVey swore, his voice thin and ragged. He cursed John Bristow savagely.

Bristow's voice reached him. "Did you think I'd step aside and let you have her, McVey?" the man shouted. "Why, you poor fool, she's more precious to me than anything I own!"

McVey remained silent, trying to discover exactly from where Bristow's voice came. He had one slim hope. The man wasn't shooting now; that meant Bristow was no longer able to get him in his sights, and would have to leave his present position to shoot again. Despite the tearing pain of his wounds, McVey rose to a crouching position behind a boulder and readied the Henry rifle.

Bristow's voice reached him again, full of mockery. "I let my sister send the message, McVey, without any intention of letting her bring Janice to you. I set this trap because I knew you'd come for Janice sooner or later, and I wanted the odds on my side. You're too damn' lucky, Mc-

Vey, for anybody to take chances with you!"

McVey still made no reply.

Bristow was silent for a time, then: "McVey! You hear me, McVey?"

McVey waited, his teeth clenched against pain. There was a long quiet, then he heard the thud and rattle of a thrown rock. He drew his lips back in a bitter smile. He wasn't letting himself be baited. Bristow could throw a hundred rocks to distract him, but he wasn't going to expose himself.

THERE was another long silence, then McVey sensed that Bristow was on the prowl, searching for him. It was possible that the man thought he was dead, but he wouldn't be caught off guard.

He waited until the feeling of a near presence was stronger, then forced himself erect, against pain and a growing weakness, and saw Bristow fifty feet away. He yelled, "All right! Drop your gun!"

Bristow uttered a startled cry, whirled, and fired still swinging about. McVey's Henry rifle roared. Bristow spun half around and pitched to the ground. He tried to lift his revolver. McVey went at him, moving at a wobbly run. But Bristow dropped his gun, went limp, and was dead when McVey reached him.

McVey stood over him, swaying drunkenly, wondering what this would mean to him where Jan was concerned. Wondering if she had come to know what Bristow was, and could understand that McVey had had no choice but to kill him.

A drumming of hoofs sounded. McVey turned, levered another cartridge into the rifle's chamber. The rider coming across the range had a gun in his hand, but he yelled, "Hold on, McVey! Don't shoot!" It was old Brazos Addams . . . .

Brazos said, marveling, "*Amigo*, I never even heard of a man with your luck."

He insisted upon looking at McVey's wounds and had found them slight flesh wounds. The slugs hadn't embedded themselves in either McVey's side or thigh. Jeff also marveled, well aware that he had been remarkably lucky.

Brazos added, "The cure will hurt more than the wounds. But it'll be quick."

He gathered brush, built a fire, heated the blade of his knife.

The pain was severe as Brazos cauterized the wounds, and for a time it seemed that McVey would pass out.

But it was soon over, and Brazos bandaged the wounds with strips torn from a spare shirt that he found in McVey's saddle-bag. They had not discussed Bristow's death, but now McVey, sitting with his back to a boulder and rolling a smoke, said, "How's Jan going to take this, Brazos?"

The old man fed some sticks onto the fire. His bearded face was solemn in the flickering light. "It'll not be easy for her, of course," he said slowly. "No matter how he saw her, she looked on him as—well, as her father. But she knows now that he was a man to stop at nothing to get what he wanted. A thing I've known about him for a long time, and never liked.

"He told her after you'd gone that he wasn't letting you or any man have her, and that she had to stay at the Crown Ranch. He gave orders to us hands that she and Miss Louise wasn't to have mounts or the buckboard. Miss Louise told me about it this afternoon. When I saw him ride out, I figured he was up to something. So I thought it over and finally followed him. When I heard the shooting—Well, I thought you were a goner, *amigo*."

McVey lighted his cigarette, saying nothing.

Brazos went on, "Nobody's going to mourn him for long. Not Jan, not Miss Louise. I'll catch his horse for you, and you ride on to the ranch. Tell Jan, and get it over with. Tell Miss Louise to send a wagon out. I'll stay with the body till it gets here."

McVey said, "All right," and got shakily to his feet.

He rode into the Crown ranchyard two hours later, crossed it to the big adobe house. As he eased himself from the saddle, Jan opened the door.

"Jeff!" she called. "Jeff, is that you?"

She was sure of him even as she spoke, and came hurrying across the gallery. McVey took a wobbly step toward her. Jan put her arm about him, and he leaned heavily upon her as they moved into the house.

Louise was in the parlor. She rose from her chair, crying out as she saw how weak McVey looked and noticed his blood-stained clothing. Jan said anxiously, "Sit down, darling. Take this chair."

He shook his head, drew a little away from her. "I've got something to tell you," he said. "Maybe when you know what it is, you won't want me here."

They stared at him uneasily, then Louise asked thickly, "He's dead?"

McVey nodded. "He tried to kill me," he said. "There was only one way I could stop him." He watched their faces. "There was only one way."

Louise's face paled, and her shoulders sagged. But immediately she sighed heavily as she said, "Yes. It was the only way."

Jan had flinched, and for a moment there was only sadness in her eyes. Then that was gone, and she smiled at McVey through tears. She moved close to him again, and if there was any change in her at all, it seemed to him, it was a sudden release from fear. She came into his arms, where she belonged.

"What's done is done," she whispered. "We won't look back."

That's how it would be, McVey knew. They wouldn't look back, but only toward their future. He tightened his arms about her.

It's a strange situation wherein a man legally inherits a ranch from his father, yet has to fight to keep it—while overcoming the machinations of a crooked lawyer! Be sure to read—

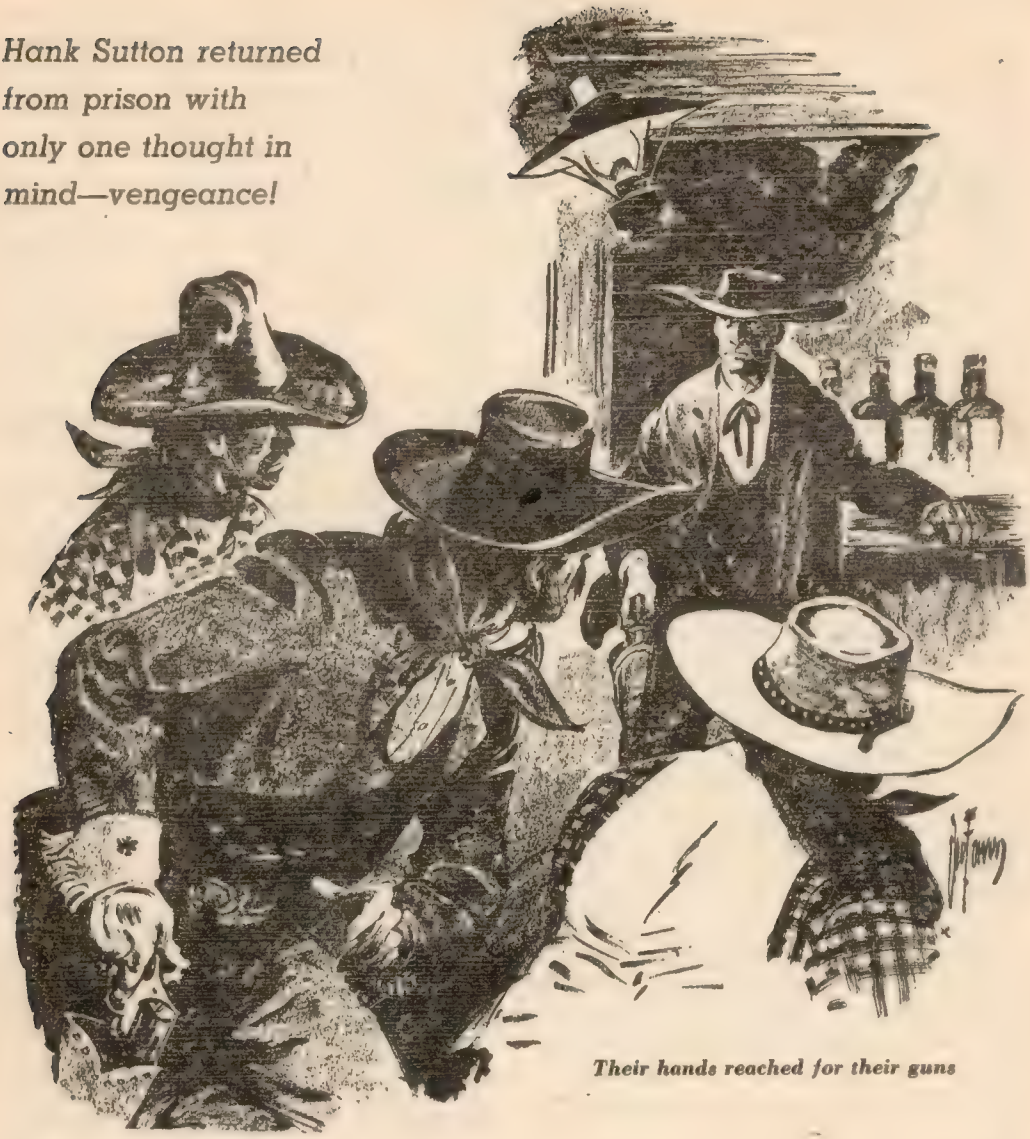
SUNBLADE

A Novel by

LEWIS B. PATTEN

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE!

Hank Sutton returned from prison with only one thought in mind—vengeance!



Their hands reached for their guns

Hunger of the Hawk

THEY clipped the Hawk's pinions, cropped his talons, and locked him in a cage. For ten years he had brooded behind the bars. The sheen of his skin had become lusterless, his flesh withered, his muscles stringy. In the end they said he was broken, no longer dangerous. Failing to note the terrible cold fire in his wide-set gray eyes, the arrogant lift of his head, the quickness of his long fingers,

By G. DAVISSON LOUGH

they said he was no longer dangerous. . . .

By their yard-stick, compliant to the rule of *snap-judgment*, they were right. The Hawk was fifty, yet appeared seventy. His manner was docile, his voice humble. "He is dying," they said. "So let him die in the open, on some high place in the sun." Then they opened his cage and he came out, shuffling a little after long years of doing the lock-step.

It was a mistake, letting him go. Had the warden been psychic he might have heard the voices from out beyond the shadows of those who had died by the Hawk's talons warning him. But the warden was anything but psychic.

"John Sutton," he said, "I do hope you have learned your lesson here, and that from this hour henceforth you will live in respect of the law. I wish you success and contentment."

John Sutton's reply was calm, without emotion. "I have served ten years in your prison for a crime I did not commit," he said. "A lie, sworn to, sent me here. I am going to kill the man who told that lie."

With that statement the Hawk, for the first time in ten years, showed that the buds of his talons and the seeds of his wings still were alive, still capable of sprouting anew.

The warden smiled upon him tolerantly, seeing nothing of the dynamite and burning fuse, seeing only the shell of the cartridge after the explosion, and the smile said: "A man must blow a little to bolster his self respect." He reached forth a pink, plump hand and shook John Sutton's bony claw with it.

"Good-by, John Sutton," he said.

"Good-bye, Warden," John Sutton replied.

Word had come to the Hawk while in his cage that his prey nested somewhere in the hills north of the White River range. The first part of his flight was by train, from the prison town to a cowtown called Sago at the end of the tracks. From Sago his wings must be the feet of a horse.

He arrived at Sago empty-handed, without gun or luggage. After the train backed away from the station, he stood on the platform, black flat-topped, broad-brimmed hat in hand, reveling in the caress of the cool evening breeze.

STANDING there looking off in the darkness, he rated nothing more than an occasional cursory glance. A thinnish, aging man in a black serge suit two sizes too large for him and a cheap pair of Chicago low-cut shoes, he appeared wholly unimportant. Aware of this, it occurred to him that people might take him to be a lunger, here in the high country for his health.

As he stood there the sheriff of Sago, a tall paunchy man with a beefy face and pleasant blue eyes, came up.

"Evening, friend," the lawman said.

"Evening," the Hawk replied, despising the whispery quality the years in the cage had given his voice. He must remember to raise his voice, speak louder now that he was free. He couldn't do much about the pasty hue the cage had smeared upon his face. Days and nights in the open, sunshine and wind, good food and restful sleep, would, in time, erase that. But he could speak loudly, firmly. Also he must take care that he didn't fall into the shuffling step that came from marching in close single-file.

The sheriff took a stogie from his vest pocket, offered it to the Hawk. "Welcome to Sago, stranger," he said.

In doing this he moved his head so that the light from a boxed lantern beside the station door fell clearly upon his face. The Hawk saw and was startled. A question he'd been entertaining since his release from prison began hammering in his consciousness.

He wondered: Will I be recognized? Will I be hounded by every gunslick who might be ambitious to account for my passing with a notch on his gun? Will Elizabeth recognize me, if I find her? Will this man recognize me? Here's Hooker Dyeson, a man I knew in Abilene, Will he recognize me now?

The Hawk declined the stogie with

thanks, and the sheriff put it in his own mouth, lit it. "Stopping here for a spell?" he asked.

"For the night only."

"Too bad," the sheriff said, wagging his head. "We need men like you here in Sago—mature, sensible men. Too many wild ones here. Too damned many!"

"Thanks," said the Hawk, at ease now that Dyeson had failed to recognize him. He went on, venturesomely, testing the disguise the cage had given him. "You're Hooker Dyeson?"

The sheriff nodded, mildly surprised.

"A man on the train spoke highly of you, described you," the Hawk lied. It was a kind of lie he'd employed with profit these past ten years. In prison he'd made hands of such lies to smooth the feathers of the little birds on whom he'd depended. Little birds, he'd observed, despise to have their feathers rubbed the wrong way. "He said that you were once a Texas Ranger, and that you still knew how to rake the tough ones over the coals of justice."

The sheriff smacked his lips as if he'd tasted a fine sweetness. "Come over to the Sago Bar, Mr.—" he began.

"Jones," said John Sutton. "John Jones."

"I want to buy you a drink, Mr. Jones."

"Thanks," said the Hawk. "I don't drink. My health."

The sheriff nodded with the proper show of understanding. "Sago has a fine climate," he said. "A fine climate."

He was turning away after more cordial words when the Hawk decided to ask the question he must ask to seek out his prey. "Sheriff," he said softly.

"Yes," the lawman said, pausing.

"I'm looking for an old acquaintance I've heard lives near here. A man by the name of Bob Ellem."

"Ellem?" The sheriff cocked his head like a curious dog, winked thoughtfully at the darkness. "Yes! Yes, I knew a man by that name. Bob he was called. Bob Ellem. Big yellow-headed gent. Clean-eyed, honest feller. Got mixed up in a shootin' at Abilene. A gent by the name of Press Trefew was shot in the back one night in the alley behind the Commercial House. Ellem was the only witness. He put the killin' on a Combine gunman. A gent you've likely heard of. Hawk Sutton. Hawk's in prison now. Ellem sent him there; then married his wife and dropped out of sight with her. If that's the man you're lookin' for, I knew him. But I don't know where he is now. Is he your man, you think?"

"No," the Hawk said quickly. "No, I reckon not."

THE sheriff was gone and he was alone. The day had cast its last shadow and the night was come in earnest. Off somewhere in the darkness where there was a spot of moisture in the earth a colony of frogs cheeped lonesomely. Their music was the music of spring, a fan-fare to the rising sap. He shut his eyes and let a varied picture of spring on the plains, in the foothills, in the mountains, stand before his memory.

Ranch cooks making ready their chuck-wagons for the spring roundups, cowhands laying aside their work of the tedious time of winter—leather-rivetings, hair ropes, saddle-toolings, bits of doings that had occupied their hands and brains and kept them from becoming moon-eyed. Children, restless with the schoolroom, snatching truant minutes to kneel in the dirt and play at *knucks* and *little ring*, marbled spheres of brightness flashing from their grimy fingers. Town women, range women, putting hatching eggs under their broody biddies. Spring on the range, a fine time to be alive and free.

He thought: In the spring the hawk is lean and strong and alert, his whistle is the shrillest of any time of the year, his plummet and kill the swiftest.

He built a cigarette, lit it, and walked down from the station into the rut-lined street. Two blocks from the station he turned into the shop of Simon Fischer, gunsmith.

He was travel dirty, weary, and hungry, but first he must attend to this more urgent need. He must buy a gun—the

Hawk's talons. A Colt Peacemaker .45, if he could find one here that was right. If not, then a Colt Peacemaker .44 on a .45 frame.

"Howdy, stranger," said old Simon Fischer, nodding his round, gray-tufted head, his tiny blue eyes lined on the Hawk's face like two little blue nails striking out. "What'll it be for you?"

The Hawk named his desire.

"Yes, I got me such a weapon. Used a mite, but by a capable hand." He plucked a gun that glistened like warm satin from its black walnut grips to its filed down sight from behind the glass of a wall cabinet, stared at it a moment like a man might stare at the sleeping face of a beloved friend, and handed it to the Hawk. "It was Charley Fore's gun. You've heard tell of Charley Fore, I reckon."

The Hawk shook his head, closing his eyes for fear something in them, something old and cold and ugly, might betray him. "No," he said, "I never heard tell of a man by that name." A hard small tingle went up his arm from the touch of the gun on his palm.

Twice this night he had lied. Once to the sheriff about the man on the train. Now to the gunsmith about not knowing Charley Fore.

Charley Fore? Charley Fore was a special memory of his. Outside of Cheyenne on a cold, starlit night more than eleven years ago he and Charley Fore had met. Charley Fore had killed more men than he had fingers and toes. He had killed for women, for money, and for the hell of it. The memory of him did not hurt now. It was a clean memory, as the Hawk saw things clean and dirty. He'd waited beside the trail, standing by his horse, for Fore to ride up; then stepped out into the starlight and called him.

"Hawk Sutton, Charley. Get at your gun."

So he'd given Fore a little better than an even, considering Fore was mounted on a standing horse. Shooting at a down angle, Fore's draw didn't have to level. It had only to clear the gun of the holster. On the ground, as he'd been, his draw had to come better than level. It had to come a-tilt. The difference was small, but it was a difference. But it had given Fore the edge, and it left the thing clean. He'd tried many times to make Elizabeth see it that way. But he had always failed.

"It's killing no matter, John," she had said.

HE JERKED stiff at the sound of her voice in his memory. The Combine had paid him five thousand for Charley Fore. What a sour note in their love song old Charley had been. . . .

"Why would a man ever part with a sweet little gun like this?" he said to the gunsmith.

"Why? Because a dead man's got no need for any kind of a gun. That's why. Hawk Sutton out-gunned Charley Fore one night some eleven years back up in Wyoming. Ever hear of Hawk Sutton, stranger?"

"No," the Hawk lied for the third time this night.

Simon Fischer wagged his head wonderingly. "Hawk was a man-hunter for the Citizens Combine, a kind of vigilante gang that used to ride with mighty big stirrups around the Territories. Downed the tough ones, the Hawk did, the ones the marshals and the sheriffs fell down on. But he never took a mean advantage of a man. He was as straight as Dan'l Boone's ramrod. But there was a gent by the name of Bob Ellem—"

The old man sucked in a long breath, his eyes nailing the Hawk's hand with the gun in it. "Bob Ellem lied, I reckon; and his lie sent Hawk Sutton to prison. There was them that said Ellem was an honest man, that he wasn't a liar. I don't know."

"And this Bob Ellem," said the Hawk, slowly, holding down the eagerness that boiled up inside him, "what became of him?"

Simon Fischer's eyes brightened, as with suspicion. "There was a scrape at Abilene. A man by the name of Trefew was shot in the back. Ellem put the killing on Hawk Sutton. Afterwards Ellem disappeared, and Hawk Sutton's wife and daughter with him. Maybe it was the

woman that put the lie in Ellem's mouth. I—"

"No!" said the Hawk.

And with that one word, spoken too hastily, a silence came into the gun shop. A silence that was heavy and uneasy. Finally, Simon Fischer said:

"It's a good gun, stranger. It let Charley Fore down, and with some men that would Jonah it. But if you're not superstitious. . . ."

"I'll take it," the Hawk said.

Across the street from the gun shop, the Hawk ate a meal of flannel cakes, fried eggs, ham, apple pie, and coffee. Afterwards, when he'd roamed the streets a while, smoked four cigarettes, he went to the hotel and asked for a room. He needed a horse, but that could wait until tomorrow. He was tired and wanted a bath. The hotel clerk watched him write the name John Jones in the register, took his money, handed him a key.

"Room sixteen, Mr. Jones," he said. "Last one back on the second floor. You can't miss it."

"Thanks," the Hawk said and went slowly up the stairs.

He had removed his coat and vest and was sitting on the bed unlacing his shoes when someone rapped on the door. "Come in," he said, touching the gun in a holster on the bed beside him. Simon Fischer opened the door and sidled into the room, nailing the Hawk's face with his little pointed eyes.

"Close the door," the Hawk said.

Fischer closed it carefully, never taking his eyes off the man on the bed. "I got to thinking about you after you left tonight," he said. "I know who you are. I've been in business several places, Abilene first, then drifting westward. Prison's changed you plenty, but I recognized you the minute you walked into my shop."

There was a tight silence, then the Hawk said, "Well?"

"I owe you something for Charley Fore," Fischer said. "He killed my only brother—a kid, hot-tempered, impulsive. My brother was no match for Fore with a gun, though he tried to be."

There was another hard silence. Again the Hawk broke it. "Well?"

"Bob Ellem's living at a cowtown not more than a day's ride from here. Stacy on the river. You've heard of it? Ellem's the sheriff there. He's going by the name of Elmer Thomson now."

HERE, the Hawk thought with a weary feeling of relief, comes the end of the trail, and I've hardly started out on it. "Thanks," he said quietly. He'd felt safe after Dyeson had failed to recognize him, but he didn't feel safe now. He thought how many men there were up and down the range who would glory in having his name on their tally of kills—a notch on a pistol butt, a thing to point to when deeds of daring were being tolled off. A notch cut in walnut to mark the passing of Hawk Sutton.

"An' that one—that one's for Hawk Sutton, who gun-fought and killed Charley Fore and Joe Bessie and King Monro. Sutton was as fast as a flash and a vanish on the draw, and never shot a man more than once to finish him off. Yeah, that one's for the Hawk—Hawk Sutton."

He drew a long, deep breath. He was older now, rusty with the years in the cage. If he could have a little time to get back in trim, then, even at his age, he might. . . . Would Simon Fischer give him a little time? He doubted it. Most men liked to talk when there was something exciting to talk about. He started to speak, but the old man spoke first, making what he was going to say unnecessary.

"I'll not give you away, Hawk. I'll keep mum, you can rely on that."

"Thanks," the Hawk said.

He knew now, and the knowledge put a cold lump in his throat. Bob Ellem was at Stacy, only a day's ride away. When Simon Fischer was gone, he sat down on the bed again, pushed his face down hard into his hands, stared through the spread of his long fingers at the dirty carpet on the floor.

"I wonder," he asked himself, "does little Kanny have blue eyes, dark wavy hair, the clear soft skin of her mother? If she is like that, then she's like Eliza-

beth, and that is like I want her to be."

He recalled what Simon Fischer had said about Elizabeth putting the lie that sent him to prison in the mouth of Bob Ellem, and he shook his head fiercely. No, Elizabeth had not done that. Ellem had manufactured his own lie, manufactured it to put him away so that he could have the time and the opportunity to steal Hawk's wife and child.

Ellem had changed his name, then. He and Elizabeth and Kanny were living under the name of Thomson. That said they were afraid he would manage to escape the cage, come looking for them. To know they lived in dread of him warmed the coldness inside him. Still, it bothered him to know that he still caused Elizabeth trouble. She must be afraid for Ellem now as she had been for him. Ellem was sheriff at Stacy. He recalled the tenor of her fear in the old days long before Ellem's black lie had parted them.

"Some day, John, there'll be a quicker gun, and that day will mark me a widow. Kansas is less than a year old now, but it's plain that she worships you. What will your death do to her? And I love you. John, I don't know how much longer I can stand it."

Suddenly the only thing in his mind was the question: How fast is Bob Ellem with a gun? And there with the question was the answer his memory made, He isn't fast at all. He's as slow as Christmas. He's brave and mighty with his hands, but with a gun? Why, he's a regular slow-poke.

"I'm going to kill him," the Hawk said. He rose and paced the floor as for ten years, when troubled, he had paced his cell. "I'll shoot him in the guts and watch him squirm to death. He lied about Trefew's murder. He was after Elizabeth all the time, him and his slow hand and his mouthings of justice."

With the passing of the fury there came the whisper of a voice from within him: "Wait, Hawk. Wait until you're stronger, surer in your nerve. Wait. Wait, Hawk."

AFTER breakfast the next morning he bought a horse and riding gear at the Sago livery and rode straight to Stacy. He arrived soon after dark. Ten years out of the saddle had taken their toll. He was stiff, sore in every muscle, bone-tired. He wasted no time in stabling his horse and getting to bed at the hotel. He was still weary the next morning and so stiff he could scarcely move. He ate breakfast in the hotel dining room, then went for a walk around town. The walk helped the stiffness, and he felt better when he returned to the hotel for lunch. It was late afternoon when he got his first look at Bob Ellem. Then he saw him only briefly as Ellem rode past the hotel, accompanied by a man the Hawk took to be his deputy.

A loafer in the lobby, seeing the two men ride past, said to the Hawk: "Heading out for the Deerbacks. Rustlers been troublesome over that way." The man wagged his head as if being a sheriff was the roughest thing on earth. "Somebody took a pot shot at Thomson from a dark alley the other night. Put a bullet through his hat. He's received a couple of unsigned notes lately, tellin' him to resign from the sheriff's job. If I was him, I'd do it. They say his wife has lost twenty pounds since this rustlin' started up, worryin' about him."

Twilight was settling into night when the Hawk, standing in front of the hotel, saw three familiar figures dismount in front of a saloon down the street. Sight of them caused the Hawk's breath to catch roughly in his throat. One of them was squat with long arms and extremely bowed legs. Another was tall, heavy through the chest, and wore the skirts of his coat wedged back behind the black open-topped holsters at his hips. The third one, also tall, was round-shouldered and waspish. They entered the saloon in single file, the squat one leading the way.

The Hawk thought, The sheriff goes riding to the Deerbacks and his rustlers come to town. A tight, cheerless grin crimped the corners of his long, thin mouth.

When the batwings fanned behind the trio, the Hawk left the hotel, walked down the street. He stopped in front of the jail

to look at a row of reward posters tacked on a board. One of them, clean and fresh-looking, interested him. It was a WANTED FOR MURDER sheet for one Sebe Trippett. But the picture was not a picture of Sebe Trippett, the Hawk knew. Puzzled, he walked on, lips set, brow furrowed in thought.

Two blocks beyond the business section he stopped in front of a white cottage that, he had learned by asking a small boy on the street, was the home of Sheriff Thomson. A light burned in one of the front rooms. After glancing around and finding himself alone, the Hawk turned off the sidewalk and walked slowly toward the glowing windows.

He saw them as he gained the shadow of a clump of shrubbery beside the nearest window. Elizabeth was sitting by a little table, a sewing basket in her lap. Beside her, sitting on the floor, an arm thrown affectionately across her knees, was his daughter. Sight of them almost took his breath away, and the thumping of his heart became so loud he thought they would hear it.

Kansas, he was glad to see, had Elizabeth's hair, eyes, and complexion. Kansas —and he became exultantly happy for it —was a healthy, beautiful girl. He perceived the tender sensitiveness of her nature as she lifted her head suddenly and looked up into her mother's face. His next breath was long and dragging, rough, with the hint of a shudder in it. Mother and daughter began talking and he was surprised to learn that he could hear them plainly.

He listened, with clenched teeth and fisted hands, to them voice their anxiety for the sheriff, express their hopes for his safe return from the rustler hunt. At last, when he could stand their fear-filled, loving concern for Bob Ellem no longer, he made his way carefully around the shrubbery and almost ran from the yard.

FOR the next three hours he roamed the streets, a confused and wretched man. Once, pausing to look up at the stars, he whispered the wish to die. To die, he thought, was the only way to escape the pangs of this terrible hunger that had set up in his vitals when he had looked upon his child and her mother, heard their voices.

At a few minutes past eleven, when he felt sure Kansas would be in bed and asleep, he returned to the sheriff's house.

Light still shone from the front windows; and as he climbed the steps to the porch he saw Elizabeth, alone in the room, still sitting with her sewing in her lap. He rapped gently on the door. After a moment, Elizabeth asked:

"Who is it?"

"John," he said.

She opened the door quickly. Her face was a white blur in the soft darkness as she strained forward to see him. He took off his hat, stepped closer, into the spill of light from the hall.

"Well, Bets, I'm free."

"Come in, John." Her voice was thick, like she'd waited too long to breathe.

He followed her into the living room, watched calmly while she drew the shades. When she turned to face him her lips were slightly parted as though she felt some difficulty in getting her breath and her face was pale. "Kanny's in bed, asleep. You came for her?"

He didn't speak, didn't move, just looked at her with a strange, dry look in his eyes. Finally, she said: "We changed our name, did everything we could to keep you from finding us, if they set you free. I've said a thousand prayers, asking that we never see you again."

"You hate me that much?"

"No." She shook her head stiffly. "I knew if you found us, you would try to kill Bob, try to take Kanny from me. I loved you once, John. I tried hard to understand the thing in you that I came to hate—your lust to kill. I had to understand that if I were to live with you, mother your child. And—and I couldn't do it, John. That's why I got a divorce after your conviction."

"Ellem's the sheriff here," he said flatly. "A sheriff must kill at times."

"In the line of duty, yes," she said.

"Do I need to name the differences between the way you worked and the way a sheriff works?"

"No."

"Bob is not a gunfighter, John."

"It might be better if he were."

"John, you can't shoot him down in cold blood."

"He thinks I can. He told the court I shot Press Trefew in the back—from the dark. Why should I bother to disappoint him about me? He lied me into prison, to get you and Kanny."

"He thought he was telling the truth," she replied miserably.

"I never shot a man in the back in my life," he said viciously.

"I believe you," she replied. "Any number of men in Abilene might have been mistaken for you in the bad light of that alley. I told Bob that, begged him not to testify against you. He has a stubborn sense of honesty, John. And that's why he's staying on here in Stacy as sheriff. He knows he'll be killed soon, knows the only way to avoid it is to get out, but he won't leave. A month ago he arrested a rustler named Sammy Parsaw. Later he killed Parsaw when the man tried to break jail. Since then the three of us haven't known an untroubled moment. Parsaw's brother is the leader of a gang of rustlers operating from the Deerbacks. He's a gunfighter, a ruthless killer, and he's sworn to kill Bob to avenge his brother. There have been threatening unsigned notes left under our front door. Twice Bob has been shot at from dark alley-ways. Once a bullet punctured his hat. If—if he'd just give it up and leave. . . ."

HE THOUGHT of the three dusty men who were in the saloon down the street at that moment, waiting for Ellem —Bandy Parsaw, Ray Stain, Clark Rester. Once the Combine had had those three names on its list. They'd been on his schedule for extermination. Strangely there was no satisfaction in the thought that they wouldn't be waiting to kill Ellem now if Ellem hadn't lied him into prison. He'd have settled with them long ago, one at a time, one way or another. He said:

"I told you many times, Bets, there are certain persons who must be killed. It's the only way to make them safe. Let them live and they'll corrupt and destroy every good and clean thing they touch. It is the same with all creatures. Take a little mink, even. It's a killer. No matter what you do to change it, it'll still be a killer when you're through. Parsaw is like that."

"And a—a hawk?" she said softly.

"A hawk exterminates vermin." He paused, looking down at the dusty square toes of his Chicago low-cuts, went on, slowly: "Sometimes it will take a good or a clean thing. And that's when it's hungry. It'll talon a weasel or a mink, though, on a full stomach, just for the hell of it." He looked her squarely in the eyes. And looking back at him she smiled, cheerlessly but tenderly.

He wondered if she understood. He was the Hawk, and he was hungry, hungry for the woman who had been his wife, and for his child. Because of that hunger he had come here to strike down Bob Ellem.

"Three of them rode past the house a while ago," she said in a thin voice. "I heard their horses, looked out, and saw them: Parsaw was in the lead. They're in Stacy now, waiting."

"They're vermin," he said. Then: "May I see Kanny?"

"Wake her?"

"Of course not."

"Why—yes—John—"

"I'll not touch her."

"All—right." She swallowed hard. He saw the flutter of it against the smoothness of her white throat. "This way."

Kansas was lying on her side, one arm thrown carelessly across the coverlet, the other bent at her side, hand under her cheek. Her lips were slightly parted as if by the beginning of a quick, bright smile. He leaned close, stared into her face with great intensity for a moment, then dipped his head, suddenly, and

kissed her lightly on the forehead.

In the front hall again, he turned to face Elizabeth. "I lied," he said thickly. "I promised not to touch her."

"I'm glad you kissed her," she said, winking back the tears that fought at her long lashes.

"He's—he's kind to her, this Ellem?"

"Very. She loves him dearly."

He started to ask other questions concerning the life here with Ellem, but, remembering what he had heard when standing outside the window, decided against it; then said: "I wanted to make you happy, Bets. Always I promised myself this one will be the last. I would collect the head money and look around for a piece of ground that will do for a little horse ranch; but always there was another, then another. King Monro led to Long Jim Hossten, and Long Jim led to Joe Bessie, and Joe Bessie led to Silver Maco, and Silver Maco to all the others. There was bad Charley Fore, whose gun I carry now; and after him the shooting in the dark behind the Commercial House in Abilene, a man dressed like I dressed then, my size and build, running from the alley, and Bob Ellem there to see him, and to cry *Hawk! Hawk!* I know now the horse ranch and the peace and contentment you wanted, and deserved, you and Kanny, would never have come."

IT SEEMED to him that he grew taller, stronger as he spoke. He was smiling tightly when he finished.

"Sooner or later," she said softly, "there would have been a faster gun. I'm glad it's turned out this way. Ten years in prison is a hard thing to bear. But it saved your life, John. You're older now, and age has taken some of the boldness and viciousness from you. After you stood up from kissing Kanny, I saw that it had. I know now that you didn't come here to kill Bob, or to take Kanny away."

He looked at her, surprise flooding his eyes for a moment, then, as the surprise faded, he smiled. "Good-by, Bets," he said. And that was all. He opened the door, stepped through it, closed it. He heard her say, "Come back tomorrow, John, when Bob's home. Please, John. I know that now you two can be great friends."

He let the smile harden to a teeth-revealing grin, and his look was the look of a death's head as he strode down the walk, leering into the darkness.

The bartender was setting up drinks to a couple of cowpunchers. The three dusty men sat at a table in back, a bottle and glasses between them. There was no one else present, except the Hawk, pushing in the batwings slowly.

It was past midnight, and the look on the bartender's face said he wanted to close up. The Hawk guessed the three dusty men were keeping the place open, hoping the sheriff would return before morning. He walked to the far end of the bar, put his back to it and stared insolently at the three dusty men.

A cowhand laughed at his back, probably at his black serge suit that was two sizes too big and his Chicago low-cut shoes. He dropped his right hand so that it hung just beneath the butt of Charley Fore's gun, that was belted low and leg-tied on his thigh. The insolence grew in his face, was an insulting sneer when Bandy Parsaw noticed it and said:

"Take a good gander, Consumption. Might do your breathers good to get an eyeful of some real he-men for once."

The Hawk said, through the growing sneer: "Your memory's rotten, Bandy. But then you always was a pig-headed dummy."

The three froze at his words. Finally, Parsaw said: "Well, bless my Pap's youngest pup! It's Hawk Sutton, run off from the pen." He grinned broadly, his wet mouth making a purplish gash under his short black beard.

Ray Stain, he of the heavy chest, reared up, stopped rearing in a half crouch, staring at the Hawk, his big right hand slowly unlumping over the butt of his gun. He of the waspish build—Clark Rester—rose slowly, sidled away from the table to the left. His close-set, pale eyes danced madly as they held onto the

Hawk's face.

"Now you know what kind of a bird it is that can't fly, don't you, Hawk?" Bandy Parsaw said with a rattling laugh.

Clark Rester cackled like a nervous rooster. "That's a good one!" he said. "That's a *real* good one!"

Stain was silent. He was thinking of his brother Erny, the Hawk guessed. How long ago was it he had shot it out with Erny? Twelve—thirteen years? . . . He had heard that Ray was faster on the draw than Erny. Well, that would be *right fast.*

"Are you tryin' to start a fuss, Hawk?" Parsaw asked.

"I was told before I went to the coop," the Hawk replied, "that Ray there was looking for me. He didn't like what I did to Erny, I heard. When I saw you boys come in here I thought I'd come along, too, and let Ray find me."

Stain's face didn't change. There was nothing in it. It was as blank as an old gray board. Rester's long lips worked nervously, making a little pout that twitched. Pawsaw looked puzzled. He said: "The Combine's busted, Hawk. If you're just itchin' for a fight, why don't you catch a flea so you'll have somethin' to scratch? They's three of us here. And we're no babes in the woods, if I have to remind you." He glanced at Rester, then at Stain. "If you're just after Stain—" He shrugged. "Why, you can't have him. Course, if Ray wants to—"

"He's old and sick," growled Ray Stain. "I don't want him. Look at him there! Why, his meat's withered. It's all he can do to tote that weapon on his hip."

THE Hawk puckered his lips and spat toward them. "Rester," he said, "that's your picture on the sheriff's newest reward poster. Where did you have that notice printed? In Cheyenne? There used to be a crooked printer there, name of Losson."

He waited a moment for an answer. None came. "I'll name the play for you, boys," he said. "You're going to kill Sheriff Thomson when he walks in here, recognizes Rester's face as the face in the picture over the name of Sebe Trippett on that reward poster, and starts to arrest Rester. Afterwards it will be learned there's been a mistake, that Rester's name isn't Trippett, that the reward notice wasn't sent out from an official source, and that the sheriff died while trying to arrest an innocent man." He paused, looked directly at Rester as he continued: "You always kept your nose clean as far as the law could find out, Rester. And I won't say this isn't a tight little play you three got figured out. Only it's not going to have a chance to work. Reason is, I got to you before you got to the sheriff."

After a short, hard silence, Ray Stain heaved a loud sigh, said: "It's Thomson's woman that put Hawk up to this call. He's savin' her man for her. I wonder what she paid him for the job?"

The Hawk's facial skin twitched. He grinned at Stain, said: "Erny's last words were a promise for you, Ray. He said that some day you'd get me for getting him. He was a dirty thief, a back-shootin' snake, and he was a liar when he said you'd get me."

"Damn you!" Stain hissed, and he whipped his hand. Down, up, out. . . .

Parsaw and Rester took Stain's cue, twitching hooked hands downward. One of the cowhands let out a yell. Hawk had Stain, that he knew. Stain had reached for his gun first, but he had him. So, like he'd said, Erny was a liar. With the must of the prison in his brain and the rust of the prison in his bones, he had beaten Stain, beaten him clean.

The jolt of his bullet rapped Stain's head back. It came rocking up again, on his shoulders, a little blue hole between its eyes.

Bandy Parsaw, the flash-draw artist of old, must be next. If he could clip Bandy he might come out of this alive. He twitched his wrist as his gun bucked, tagging Stain.

Bandy's gun was clear of leather, leveling. At the distance, a hop and a skip between them only, Bandy wouldn't

miss. He saw Bandy's gun jump, vomit. He saw Bandy stiffen, stumble. He'd got Bandy. Bandy and Ray were falling together. He twitched the gun toward Rester. Rester's gun was lapping out smoke and fire. Hawk flipped the hammer. Rester went back on his heels, grabbed at the back of a chair. He fell across Stain, the bodies making an X on the floor.

The Hawk sucked in a short, small breath, leathering his gun slowly, telling himself: "That's it. That cleans up the Deerbacks rustlers."

The batwings moved. He glanced that way, saw Bob Ellem push into the room. Hawk sagged against the bar, smiled softly at Ellem as he slid down along the tin-veneered apron back of the boot-rail. He was stretching out on his back on the floor like a tired old man preparing for a long and restful sleep when Ellem reached him.

"This man's shot in the chest," he heard Ellem's astonished voice say. "Go for a doctor, one of you. Quick!"

He wanted to tell Ellem that it was Rester who shot him, that he'd beaten Stain and Parsaw clean, but that he hadn't quite made it around to Rester; but the telling of it took effort.

Someone said, it must have been one of the cowpunchers: "Damndest thing I ever see! He waited for one of 'em to start his draw! Three of 'em there, and he *waited!*"

Ellem's voice made answer. "This is Hawk Sutton. I knew him in Abilene. He always shot from the front, always called his man first. There was a man once said he shot another man in the back, but it was a lie, and the man that said it wished afterwards that he could have the lie back to choke on."

The Hawk opened his eyes and looked at Ellem. "The man that lied on me at Abilene thought he was telling the truth," he said. "It was a mistake, not a lie. Everybody makes mistakes. Like you right now, Sheriff, holding onto that star and honoring the oath you took the day it was pinned on you. You're making a mistake. If you'd chuck them both, find yourself a neat little spread somewheres, why —why—"

"I know what you mean, Hawk," Ellem said hurriedly. "I'll do it. Want my promise that I will?"

"Yes," the Hawk said. "More than I wanted your life before."

Ellem gripped his hand. "I promise," he said.

The Hawk heard and smiled. The bartender said: "Three times he fired, and got all three of 'em in the head. Hawk Sutton, eh? I remember seeing him once, at Butte it was. Wouldn't have known him, though. He's changed, changed a heap."

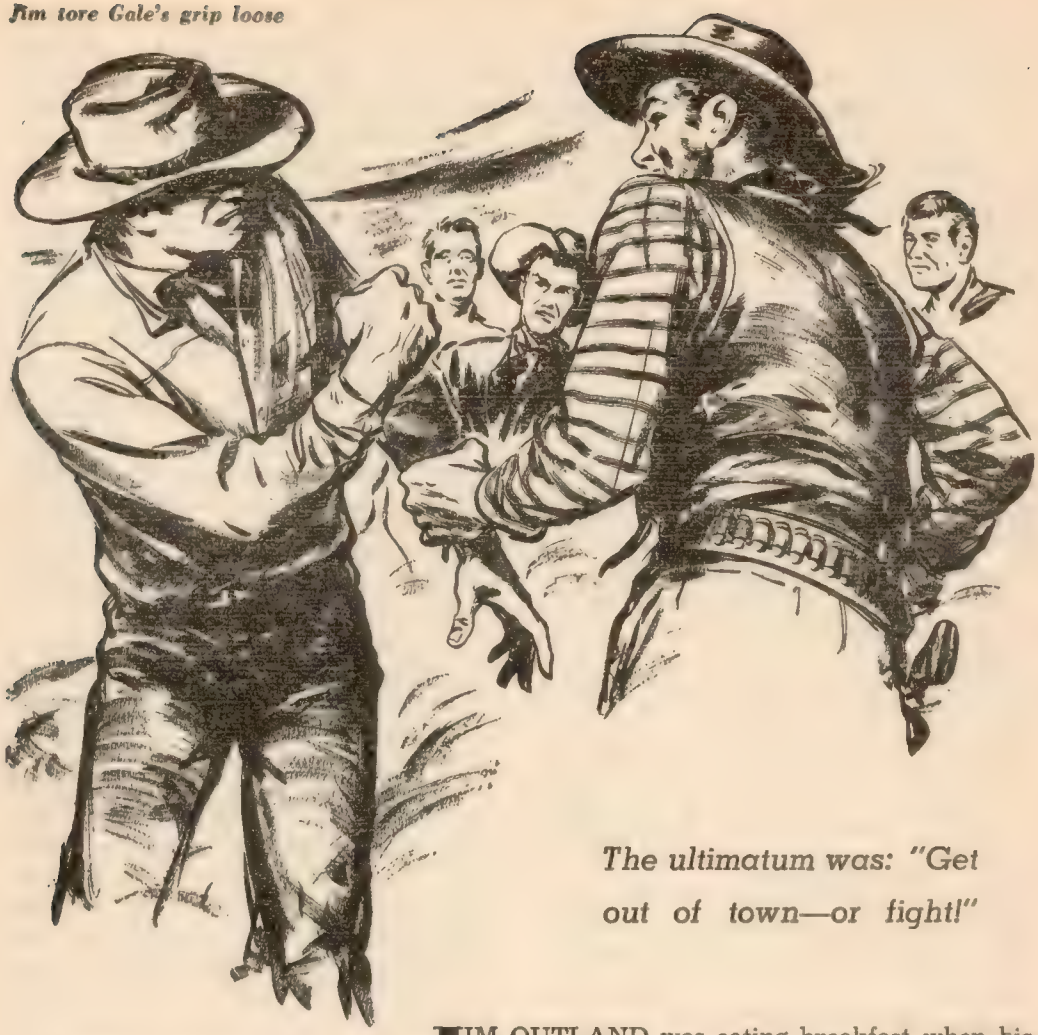
"He's dead," Bob Ellem said. He took the sheriff's star off his vest, turned around and handed it to his deputy.

NO BARBERS WANTED

THE men of the early West prized their long hair for a number of reasons. A thick head of hair that fell almost to its owner's shoulders was a fine protection against wind and rain. Many thought that an Indian judged a white man's fighting qualities by the length of his hair, and that consequently a long-haired Frontiersman was safer than a well-barbered man. Not the least of the uses a man's hair was put to was to wipe his fingers after a meal. After dining on buffalo fat, a hunter would wipe the grease off by running his hands through his thick mane, cleaning his hands and greasing his hair at the same time.

—*Robert Stephens*

Jim tore Gale's grip loose



The ultimatum was: "Get out of town—or fight!"

THIS GUN of MINE

By Lee Floren

JIM OUTLAND was eating breakfast when his wife, Sadie, came in and told him the news. She watched his right hand. She did not look him in the eye; she couldn't. His right hand lay beside his plate holding the knife. As she talked, she thought she saw the hand start to tremble.

"So Jake Smith came out of the Mercantile, and Larkin Gale called to him, and they argued. Then Larkin Gale went for his gun and he killed Smith. One bullet, about ten minutes ago. Didn't you hear the shot?"

She still did not watch his eyes. She couldn't. His hand trembled visibly now: it was not a pretty sight, because she knew why it trembled. Fear made it tremble.

"He never gave Jake Smith a chance, they said."

"What did Marshal White do? Did he arrest Larkin Gale?"

She snorted, "White, arrest Gale! White is a coward. He's sitting in his office, and he's shivering—" She stopped suddenly. *Shivering* had been the wrong word! It was too closely related to the word *shaking*. And his hand—his right hand—was almost shaking. His left hand, though, was quiet.

Jim looked at her.

Sadie looked at him. This time, she saw his eyes—gray eyes, old eyes, old before their time—and he was only thirty-one. She was his wife, and she had borne him three children; his eyes had not been like that until a year ago—when the ambush bullets had cut him down, when the bullets out of the dark had hit him and knocked him down and had broken his right arm.

She didn't like the look in his eyes.

Was he really, then, what the townsmen said he was—a coward? Was it cowardice that had made him give up the star he had carried for a decade?

He said, "Go on, Sadie; keep talking."

"There is nothing more to say. Gale walks the streets, and almost struts—he says he'll run the farmers out of Sagebrush Basin, or kill them. He says he's the law unto himself and he says no man can stop him—"

"That's enough, Sadie!"

HIS voice was harsh. A rasp hitting cold steel. She read the terrible look in his eyes, and she looked down at his hand.

"Larkin Gale," he said, "is my cousin."

"I wouldn't claim him," she said.

"He is still my cousin," he repeated.

She saw his right hand—his trembling hand—fasten like a claw around the handle of the fork. Still, it shook; his left hand, though, lay still.

"There is talk about you around town."

"I figured so. When the wolf is maimed, the coyotes play."

"Some claim you weren't maimed."

He said, "That's enough."

She looked at his hand. Then she looked into his eyes. Then, without warning, she turned, and carried her groceries into the kitchen. He listened to her steps, and wondered if she would return to the dining room.

She didn't. She bolted upstairs.

He sat there. His young-old face was bleak. He had his thoughts. Finally his hand lay still. It stopped its trembling.

He remembered things . . .

* * * * *

You were twenty. The world was yours, your boots owned the earth, and you packed a marshal's star. You were proud of that star. The trust of your people was invested in that star, and when it had been pinned on you, upon your shoulder—and your gun—had been put the silent trust of your neighbors.

You helped that trust.

You walked the street, and you walked an honest street, and your town was honest. You had to kill four men. You had killed the first, barely edging out his gun—word had gone out, and you had had to kill others. Three more, you killed. Then, your town was safe, and word went up and down the trails to stay away from Beaverton. Your town knew peace.

You saw neighbors die. You saw them born. You knew every child around there, and you had three children of your own. You had a good job and a good wife and fine children; above all, you had the respect of your town.

Then, four years ago, a trailherd had stopped, and riders had come into your town. One of the riders dismounted and said:

"I'm your cousin, Larkin Gale."

You shook hands with him. You remembered him from Texas, down there around Pecos, on the Pecos River. He was short, stocky; you were long, lanky. You shook hands. You looked at him.

"There's room here for another cow outfit. Over on Beaver Creek, there's range. We're glad to have you, cousin."

"I've heard things about you."

"Good things?"

"You run a tough town straight, they tell me."

You looked at your cousin's riders. Hard riders, Texas riders, and each packed guns. Winchesters, too, in their saddle holsters. You thought, This is a tough spread, and you looked back at your cousin.

"You check your guns in my town," you told him.

"Check our guns? You'd even make your cousin's men check their guns?"

"Yes, even my cousin's men."

Maybe it was born then, and born at this spot, and at this moment; anyway, you saw the shadows dim and gather in his eyes—you knew then he would use the advantage of blood to the *n*th degree. You knew then you were in for trouble.

"Your men check guns, Larkin Gale."

And Larkin Gale had smiled, but with his lips only. There had been more trouble with him, too. There had been that farmer who had been killed after he squatted on land claimed by Larkin Gale.

Clearly you remembered that particular day. You had ridden out of Sagebrush Basin and the sun had been hidden behind mad-scutting clouds. The world was gray. When you rode into the yard, the farmer's wife and children were weeping. Especially you remembered the wild note of loneliness in the woman's weeping.

She had lost her husband.

Then you had remembered your own wife, and your own children. Would they weep with such loneliness if you got shot down? On that thought, maybe your fear had started to feed itself, started to grow? No, it wasn't at that time. The ambush had brought about this fear.

"Who killed your husband?"

"Laddy Jones. He's one of Gale's gunmen."

You had turned your bronc. "Did Jones give your husband a chance to draw his gun?"

"No, he didn't even had time to reach for it."

"I have found out what I came to find out, madam. Good day, and my heart goes out to you."

SO you rode into the yard of Larkin Gale's ranch. Gale had come out of the house and he had swaggered the way Texas riders swagger. Each step, though, laid his right hand close to his holstered .45.

"Where is Laddy Jones, cousin?"

"Bunkhouse. Why ask?"

"He goes to jail."

"Jail? Why?"

"Murder."

"Murder is a mighty ugly word, Jim."

"I take the word of a dead man's wife. The court can decide the rest."

"Maybe Laddy has his mind set otherwise?"

"I'll change his mind."

Laddy Jones had come out of the bunkhouse. He had crossed the yard, hunched over a little; his gray eyes had been riveted on you. You went out of saddle and you moved to one side, and you watched Laddy Jones with great care.

"What do you want, tin star?"

"You're coming with me, and the charge is murder!"

Laddy Jones had uttered a snarling laugh. He had glanced at Larkin Gale, and then his right shoulder had suddenly dipped. His gun had started to lift and you had given him that edge and then you shot him through the heart.

Just one shot.

One was enough.

Then Larkin Gale—Larkin Gale, your cousin—had stood there and he had looked down at his dead rider. Larkin Gale had stood there, eyes hidden. This had taken a long minute. Now he looked up. And his eyes held red hell. But that hell was controlled. You looked at Larkin Gale, your cousin. He looked at you.

You were enemies.

And Gale said, "You did your duty, Jim. We'll plant him deep."

But his eyes still held that red hell.

* * * * *

Suddenly Jim felt sick inside. He

wanted no more breakfast. He shoved back his plate and got his hat and went down town.

He walked down the graveled walk and his boots made their noisy sounds. He looked at the Montana sky and it was packed with clouds—wind-hurried, wind-harassed clouds. That same type of hurried sky had seen Laddy Jones die.

He fastened the loop on the gate and then looked back at his house. It was a small, well-painted house and upstairs he caught, suddenly, the futter of a lace curtain, and he knew that she had been watching him.

He walked down town.

"Hello, Jim."

"Hello, Mr. Outland."

"Hello, Marshal—shucks, I don't mean *Marshal*, I meant to say *Jim*."

Jim smiled.

He nodded at them. They were his neighbors. He knew them well and they knew him well and he wondered, "What do they think of me? Do they figure I'm an out-and-out coward?"

What else can they think, Jim Outland?

He went to turn into the Golden Hour but a voice, coming from down the plank sidewalk, stopped him, and this voice said, "Could I have a minute or two with you, Jim?"

"What is it, Ike?"

Ike Myers was panting, and he hadn't walked fast, either. He was too fat, much too fat. He didn't do enough physical work in his store. Jim looked at the obese, boyish face; Ike was a good fellow.

"Larkin Gale killed that farmer named Jake Smith. Smith never got a chance even to reach for his gun."

"So I heard, Ike."

"Jim—"

"Your voice is awful loud, Ike. People are stopping to stare at us."

"White won't do nothing. White is afraid."

"White is the Law here."

"Larkin Gale is in the Broken Cue. Gale says it is up to you."

"Why me?"

"Gale says you're a— Jim, why in hell's name did you desert us so this Texas crew can wreck our town?"

"I didn't desert you."

"You came home from the hospital. You turned down your old star. Larkin Gale is laughing at you, Jim. And when he laughs at you he laughs at the rest of the townspeople also. You can see that, can't you?"

"I can't see it."

Jim went into the saloon, his right arm throbbing as though a hot branding-iron was pushed against his flesh, and he had a rough spot in his throat. He was thinking: They can fight their own battles. They gave me a little old paycheck and a star and the star pulled me into Larkin Gale's ambush. So you finally admit, Jim Outland, that Larkin Gale and his men ambushed you because you had killed Laddie Jones?

"Shoot you a game of pool, Jim."

"You're on, fellow."

JIM selected his favorite cue from the rack and got the break on a game of rotation. He was glad he didn't finger his cue with his right hand for they watched him and they could have seen how his hand trembled.

They're watching you, Jim Outland, he thought. Their hopes and their fears circle around your person, and that is the truth . . .

Covertly he glanced at them.

All were his neighbors.

They were brave men but they were not gunmen. They would fight with their fists until they died, but they had sense enough not to go up against a gun that would be sure to kill them.

They would not commit suicide.

"Jim, doggone it, you sure missed a set-up shot!"

"Not my day to win, I reckon."

Jim heard somebody moving behind him and he turned suddenly, aware that his back was toward the door. Then he remembered that he no longer carried a badge and he remembered he was unarmed.

He saw Marshal White. This lawman was lanky and cadaverous and unseen weights bent his body. Nobody spoke and everybody watched Marshal White. They had taken their eyes away from Jim and now they watched White.

White shifted his chew. His words were addressed to the world in general. White said, "I'm a-lookin' for Ike Myers."

Somebody said, "Ike is down at his store."

White said, "I got to see Ike Myers." He turned and he left.

Jim heard White's boots move down the plank walk and then the sounds died away in the distance. Jim returned to his pool game.

A man said, "Ike is head of the town council."

Another said, "White must want to turn in his badge."

A man said, "That must be it. White has got cold feet. He wants to turn in his star."

"Hell, this town is *really* without Law, now."

"White never was no lawman. When Jim was the Law—"

The speaker stopped suddenly.

Jim walked to the cue rack and jammed his cue into an open spot and then walked out without a word.

His partner stared after him.

Outside, Jim met Ike Myers.

This time Myers had been running. He was panting heavily. "Jim, White just quit. He turned in his badge. Jim, I got a star for you."

"I don't want it."

He watched Myers let his mouth flop open. Suddenly Myers closed his mouth so fast his teeth clicked. "It's your old star, Jim."

"I say I don't want it!"

"Jim, reconsider, please."

"I have had my say."

Myers had the star in his moist fat palm. Jim's old star. Some of the nickel was worn off it and it had a dent on one prong—still, it was Jim's old star. Jim chopped his left hand down and he knocked the star to the sidewalk. He had used his left hand, and not his right; Ike Myers watched him with a great surprise in his eyes.

"Jim, you hit my wrist hard, and I thought you were my friend—"

Jim pivoted and he looked at the townsmen and women. They were his neighbors. What showed in their eyes? Was it hate? Fear? No, something stronger than hate and fear showed.

What was it? Was it pity?

He didn't want pity.

He walked away. Still, he saw, in his mind's eye, the old star lying on the sidewalk. It needed to be polished. It had seemed to look at him; he had not dared look at it. Then he remembered the eyes of his neighbors.

His neighbors pitied him.

He could stand anything, but he could not stand pity.

Jim was thinking: I'll have to leave town. I'll have to pack up, and me and my woman and my kids'll have to leave town. I can't stand this any longer.

A man came out of the Broken Cue and grabbed Jim's left arm. His whiskery face was leering as he growled:

"Well, well, Cousin Jim! You know me, cousin. I'm your cousin, Larkin Gale!"

Jim's neighbors heard Gale. They looked at Gale's ugly face. Was there a bloodtie between Jim Outland and this red-eyed devil?

"Get your hand off me, Gale!"

"Cousin Jim Outland, is it true when they say you are a coward? Is that true, or is Larkin Gale just hearing lies about his cousin?"

Jim didn't know how he did it. His right hand was trembling like it had the palsy. Still, that right hand hacked down, and it hit like a club. It smashed on Gale's forearm and tore his grip loose.

Jim felt the man's thick fingers rasp across his skin.

"Get your dirty hands off me, Gale!"

WHEN Larkin Gale stepped back his eyes were the color of muddy Missouri River water.

"Cousin"—Gale emphasized that word. "—thanks for hittin' me. Now I can call you what you are, and you're a yellow-bellied coward! I'm here in this town—*your* town. And now it's my town, and I'm runnin' it as I see fit. Do you understand that?"

Jim watched him.

Jim's hand trembled. He watched the thick lips, the ugly eyes. He hated Larkin Gale.

Larkin Gale said, "I'm floatin' a few undesirables out of town. You're one we don't want. You'll be the first to leave. I'm orderin' to have you and your woman and kids out of town by midnight tonight."

Jim turned and walked away.

They watched him. They had heard every word. They watched him and he knew, without looking, they did not have hate in their eyes. They had pity, and he didn't want pity. He could have stood hate, but not pity.

He went home. His wife was in the living room and he asked, "Where are the children?"

"Upstairs."

"What are they doing?"

"They're just—well, upstairs."

He walked slowly up the stairs. The children were packing their things. They looked at him. John was eight, Kerrie was six, and little Joe was only four. They said not a word. But Kerrie had been crying. Her eyes showed that.

John was as stiff as a new poker. Joe said nothing and his chubby face was unhappy. Joe wanted to cry but he couldn't cry. He was a boy, and boys don't cry. Let girls like Kerrie cry.

Jim went back down the stairs. Sadie was not in the living room. He started for the kitchen and then he stopped.

He listened.

Sadie was in the kitchen. She was weeping, but the sound was very low. She did not want him to hear her.

DUSK was tiptoeing across the Montana sagebrush. It was enfolding the little town of Beaverton. He could see the dusk, and he could feel it and he could smell it—it had the clean smell of sagebrush and greasewood. Dusk was again claiming his town.

Not his town now. Larkin Gale's town.

He walked to the outskirts of Beaverton where he stood on a small hill and looked toward the south across the grass flats. He could scarcely make out the mouth of Larb Creek as it came down from the distant Larb Hills. The haying season was on and down on the flat a mower talked as it victimized the grass to make it lie in long and even lengths.

He could see the tips of the Little Rockies miles to the southwest.

Behind him a child called to another and a dog barked as he played with the children. Children didn't know about danger and fear and hate and love. Oh, yes, they did know—he remembered John and Kerrie and little Joe. Usually they played outdoors at this time of the evening.

But this evening they were not playing outdoors. They were inside the house and they were sorrowful and they were afraid.

He walked down an alley.

He remembered the guns . . .

The guns had blazed from all directions. They had spoken, and their tongues had been ragged and red. Lead had hit him and had turned him and had dropped him. He had come to in the hospital in the county seat. He had come to in the Glasgow hospital. He didn't remember being moved. He just remembered the guns—the terrible red guns, the throaty ugly guns.

He'd lain there, bandaged and sick, idly looking at the ceiling. There was no wallpaper there. Up on that ceiling were guns—and they ran across the ceiling—their flames lanced across the ceiling.

He had wanted to die.

He had not wanted to die because of physical pain. He had wanted to die because he had suddenly realized he was a coward. He was afraid of guns and he was afraid of living, and he was afraid of another ambushing . . .

Standing there in the alley, he heard a sound behind him.

He turned, hands going down; then he pulled up his hands when he saw the dog. It was Mutt. Mutt had trailed him. Mutt wagged his trail and he fawned and Jim went to his knees.

"Mutt, good old boy," Jim said.

Just a cur. A mongrel. But the children loved him. Mutt loved Jim, too. He came into Jim's arms and Jim smelled the dog odor of him. Mutt's tongue was soft velvet licking across Jim's hand with rapid dampness.

"Mutt, you should be home with the children."

Then he knew why Mutt had followed him.

The children were not playing outdoors on this night. Mutt was lonesome.

JIM stood up. He looked across peaceful Beaverton Valley. He saw the darkness claim the high cottonwoods along Beaver Creek. Darkness kissed and fondled the far boxelder trees that grew on the spot where Larb Creek entered Beaver Creek.

After this what would life be like?

First, his wife would not respect him. She would feel sorry for him but she would not love him. His children would not respect him, either.

He had realized that there could be no love where there was no respect. Life, without respect, was a farce. His life would be a farce. He would not even respect his own individuality.

He had lost his self respect.

He turned suddenly, and went toward his home.

He had a den behind the house—a single long room made of old railroad cross-ties, and he had furnished it the way he had wanted. It was a place where a man could sit alone and think.

His guns were in his den.

Lights showed from beneath the pulled-low blinds in the house. But he did not go into the house.

He wondered if ever again he would enter the house.

He did not like that thought.

But he had long ago conjured his own personal philosophy. And this philosophy was simple: A man lived only the second that his heart beat. His only breath was his present lungful of air.

Death was the only certainty.

He did not light the lamp. He found the far wall, and he felt his way along the rough wall, and he felt his way with his left hand.

He found the belt first, and he took the harness down, the twin .45s freighting the belt with steely heaviness. He felt his way outside and he carried the guns and harness in his left hand.

He buckled the thick tongue of the buckle, and his right hand shook. The guns settled with a familiar weight around his hips. He knelt and tied each holster down, feeling the buckskin thong cut into his thigh. Then, the holsters anchored, he got to his feet and, there in the dark, he drew the guns.

He was right-handed. Therefore his right hand had always been faster than his left. But now, for some reason, his left-hand gun rose faster. In fact, he couldn't get the right-hand .45 out of the holster.

He couldn't lift his right-hand gun.

"I'll use my left hand," he muttered.

The decision reached, he hurried. He had to hurry. If he didn't hurry, he would have backed out; he knew that. He had icy-cold water on his forehead. What was wrong with his sweat to make it so cold?

He stopped once and then only for a moment while he looked back at his home. He saw them there: Sadie, John, Kerrie, and little Joe.

Then he hurried on. He walked so fast he almost broke into a trot.

A neighbor said, "There goes Jim Outland. By heaven, he's strapped his guns on, he has!"

Other voices lifted. They were beyond the rim of his thoughts. He glimpsed a man running ahead of him. The man darted into the Broken Cue. The man ducked into the saloon and the half-doors

blinked, and then the man was gone from his sight.

Jim stopped.

He was across the street from the Broken Cue. He waited and he watched the Broken Cue's door and he had his thoughts. First, there was his wife, Sadie —and Sadie was true blue. There was serious little Joe and giggling Kerrie and John.

Jim thought: Get out of my thoughts, you four humans!

He watched Larkin Gale leave the Broken Cue. He thought that blood is not binding, blood is cheap, and evilness kills the tie of blood-relations. Gale was not a blood relative of his.

Gale saw him then, and Gale's shoulders bunched, and Gale stopped and settled down.

Jim watched him and wondered where he would place his bullet and he decided on the thick black evilness of Gale's chest.

"So you won't run, you broken-down gundog?"

"Drive me out, Gale!"

His neighbors watched. He could not see their eyes.

But he knew there was no pity in their eyes now.

"I'm comin' at you, Outland."

Jim watched Gale's shoulders move, and he had the sign then. Gale was compact and low and Gale was a human ball out of which would lance the sullen flame of guns—the inexorable flame of death.

Jim felt his hands meet his gun-handles. The guns started to rise and he was aware that he had no fear.

He was unhurried and he was the old Jim Outland.

He had been through this before. History always repeated itself. First there was the lift, and with it the cruel whisper of cruel steel on leather. Second, there was the leveling, the hammer coming back, then the roar. First, Gale would shoot, for Gale was living fire in his speed, and Jim was using only one hand —his left hand.

His right hand was useless.

HE HEARD Gale's guns roar. He felt his gun kick back. The dust lifted ahead of him, and he glimpsed twin geysers whip upward. Then Gale was going down.

Gale had walked ahead, almost like he was walking a tight-rope, almost daintily. Gale spread his hands and his .45s dropped and he fell toward Jim, gasping out something.

Then Gale fell on his face, and lay silent in the silent dust.

Somebody was hollering, "Jim did it, by hell! And he didn't do it with his left hand gun, either—he shot the right-hand gun first!"

The words boomed into his brain. He looked down at his fast gun—the right-hand gun. His arm was stone-steady. He hadn't even jerked his left-hand gun. His right hand had always been the faster. It was still the faster.

He holstered his gun and his arm had not a trace of tremble.

Ike Myers grasped him, and the merchant had tears. "Jim, I was going against him myself, though I'm not a gunman. Still, I aimed to match guns with him."

Jim glanced at the fat man's belly. The gunbelt was tight around it, the holster untied, the .45 out of place against the wide thigh.

Ike said, marveling, "Jim, you did it with your right hand! Do you realize that, Jim?"

"I do, Ike, and come morning I'll pick up that star."

Somebody hollered, "I'll tell Sadie and the kids, Jim."

The man turned and ran.

Jim turned, too, and he walked toward the little well-painted house. They would be waiting—John with shining eyes, Kerrie with her smile, and Sadie would hold little Joe, and Sadie would be beside herself with joy.

They stood waiting for him, smiling, on the porch.

Jim opened the gate, latched it very carefully behind him, and then he walked toward them. ● ● ●

As the Teton shot through the gate, onto the

CHAPTER I

Indian Killer

AT RETREAT the post flag at Fort Cottonwood, Nebraska Territory, had come down, limp in the windless heat. Now at four o'clock the following morning, Trooper Jeff Keefe roused from fitful slumber and sat up on the edge of his straw-tick bunk. He wanted to blame his restlessness on the humidity of this yet-unborn day, but knew it was due mostly to his troubled mind.

Only a few weeks before, Keefe and half the present garrison of Fort Cottonwood had been captured Confederate soldiers, confined in a Union prison, and doomed—so they thought—to many long years behind bars. Then they had been offered an opportunity to get out of prison. This could be accomplished if the Confed-

In an Army Post Marked for Massacre, Ex-Rebel

Death Waits for the Frontier Command

A Novelet by PAUL L. PEIL

flat, the Spencer slammed out its racket

erates would volunteer to fight Indians out West with the U.S. Army. Most of them had accepted gladly. Finally had come a chance for real freedom. A plan had been devised to seize a wagon train of silver bullion, escape to the South, and turn the treasure over to the Confederate Army. What a chance to strike a blow for the Cause! What a chance to escape from the galling shackles of discipline and suspicion!

As Trooper Jeff Keefe sat there, head in hands, pondering different angles of the scheme, he heard the shrilling and kicking of the horse in the sod stable, hard by the barracks. The troop mounts were in the big brush-topped corral. Only one animal was in the stable: the rat-tail appaloosa that Chief Buffalo Hump's son had ridden when he made his surprise appearance at the main gate yesterday.

It was so wild it had been segregated

Jeff Keefe Fights to Outsmart Scheming Traitors

from the cavalry geldings. When the thumping continued, Keefe decided it might have cast itself in the stall, not being accustomed to one. Slipping into blue breeches and carrying his boots, he went in sock feet to investigate.

The stars were gone, and the moon shed a satiny gloom over the fort. Its buildings were dark blobs, literally blisters of scorched brown earth. Yellow rays of light showed here and there; from a mess kitchen, from B Troop's orderly room. None from the stable. On a parapet by the forward double-gates, a sentry paced, head and shoulders in silhouette.

Pausing to tug on his boots, Jeff habitually noted these small details. Not quite thirty, he had a lot of Army—blue as well as gray—experience behind him. And too, this was deep in Indian country, necessitating a twenty-four hour alert.

He was still in shadows along the musty wall when a figure emerged from the stable. Jeff halted, with instinct tensing him, and remained motionless even after he recognized Ryland. Out of his own troop C, Ryland was supposed to be on Post Four of the Guard, this trick. That was on the far side of the quad.

Ryland was stepping gingerly, watching the hoofs of the paloosey-horse which he had in tow. His hand held its nose tightly snubbed, cutting off any sound, but it was skitterish at this nearness of a white man. Glancing around once, without seeing Jeff, Ryland headed obliquely toward the guardhouse.

Several things flashed through Keefe's mind. Ryland was a galvanized Yank, a rebel whose color had changed under heat. He was one of "the bunch" and in on the big plan. Inside that cottonwood log box the young Teton Dakotah, Eagle That Talks, was on ice. They had put him there for safe keeping until Colonel Warner returned.

If the bunch's tip was correct, the colonel would be escorting another bullion cargo.

Somehow, Jeff had a strong feeling there was a connection here, in this moment's action.

SHADOWS were shifting before the guardhouse now. Either Jeff's vision had adjusted to the gloom, or the two men had moved into pale light. One was Army, fully attired to campaign hat; that was all Jeff could identify. The other was the Indian.

When Ryland reached them with the horse, the Sioux mounted up. There was a haughty deliberateness in his spring to its back, and for a moment, as he regarded the pair on the ground, his contempt spanned the interval, impressing Jeff. Then he walked the animal in the direction Ryland pointed—toward Jeff.

Jeff already was frozen against the sod wall, for he'd heard the creaking sounds behind him. The little-used south gate, beyond the stable, had been opened. That was what Ryland had indicated to the Indian, who now rode so slowly and defiantly toward it.

Jeff Keefe knew the brave was riding to his death.

He came on, and Jeff could see the feathers in his hair. One eagle, one magpie, Jeff could remember from yesterday afternoon. If he saw Jeff, he gave no sign. That was the same way he'd ridden up yesterday, ignoring the excited clamor of the "movers"—the emigrants—who cluttered the flat before the fort.

They had been dumbfounded at first, as he threaded between their parked wagons and litter. They had been about to tear him from his rawhide saddle-pad when the soldiers rushed out and rescued him.

Inside, he'd patiently sat his spotted-rump pony while Captain Sawyer, second in command, summoned Sergeant Chipman to interpet. The regular "linkister" was out with Colonel Warner's column.

Steve Chipman, a tall, handsome Texan, and late rebel also, had a basic knowledge of Sioux "scatter," the root lingo used by most Plains tribes. He talked with his hands, his face and, as some of the regiment claimed, with his ears; occasionally he mixed in a few words.

He told Sawyer, "He says he will talk only with the Colonel, the chief. I told

him you were a head-man, but he wants Colonel Warner whom he knows from past parleys. He's Chief Buffalo Hump's whelp."

Sawyer exchanged a dark frown with Chipman, and narrowly studied the Indian. "Bring him to quarters. Maybe we can pry something out of him." He listened to the babble outside the 'dobe walls. "Watch those crazy overlanders. This is the wrong time to get those Sioux devils on the warpath, too."

It was the wrong time, that sulphuric summer of '64, with the nation engaged in its fratricidal civil war. Here on the high plains, in the deserts, in sandhill and mountain, people suffered its effects. Transportation was disrupted, lawlessness was rampant, communities were thrown upon their own resources.

Spread over these thousands of miles was a blanket of blue, the U. S. Army of the Frontier. It was a blanket worn thin by the drain of men eastward, and stretched threadbare to cover vital spots. When a hole appeared, the patchwork was mostly of dubious quality cloth—draft dodger and ex-rebel.

Fort Cottonwood, on the edge of Odakotah, land of the Sioux, kept its fingers crossed, its powder dry. Practically every tribe was on the hair-and-horses trail except the Tetons, the strongest. So far Buffalo Hump, their head man, while restless, hadn't got out of hand.

This—whatever it was, Jeff thought sickeningly—would be a short fuse to set off that red charge. *And* certainly it would foul up the plan! Richmond, back home, wouldn't get that million, which it sorely needed!

He saw the splotches on the horse's rump, like so much bloody spume, as the brave soundlessly turned the stable corner. In reluctant fascination, he followed along the wall, watching after him. Through the opened gate he saw the moon-dark plain beyond. Part of a Conestoga's tilted bow was visible; shrouded lumps of sleeping men dotted the ground.

The cards were stacked. Those emigrants were irritated. Some had been detained here for days by the redskin threat ahead. Others had been driven here by the real thing, raiding Arapahoes and Cheyennes. To them, an Indian was an Indian. A good one was a dead one.

With their coyote ears and trigger reflexes, they'd get this one before he could go a dozen yards, or holler *hu-ka-he!*

AND THEN, unexpectedly, after the Teton had passed a low window of the stable's side wall, a figure stepped over its mud sill. A tall man in trooper issue, with a seven-shot Spencer which he calmly was bringing to bear on the other's naked back.

Jeff sucked in his stomach. It was Junior Sergeant Chipman!

There had been a chance, remote but possible, that the Indian could make it. At least he'd had a sporting chance. This was murder—cinched too tight for Jeff to stand.

He cried, "No, Chip! Stop it!" and went pounding toward him.

However startled, the sergeant stayed put in his tracks, merely twisting around from the waist up. Jeff saw the white of his teeth, revealed by skinned-back lips—saw the white of his surprise-widened eyes. Then with an audible oath, after recognition of Jeff, Chipman snapped forward again, quickly relining the repeater.

The Teton had heard Jeff's voice. Suddenly heeling his pony, he shot through the gate, onto the flat. Once, twice, three times, the Spencer slammed out its racket. When it ceased, echoes chattered, yet above them could be heard the rapid thud of running hoofs.

Halting shock-still at Chipman's shoulder, Jeff watched the appaloosa pony vanish in gloom. The young Indian lay on the ground, where the first bullet blast had lifted and dropped him.

Chipman whirled furiously on Jeff. "Damn you! You made me miss his horse! It got away."

In the past three years Jeff had seen many men die, in various ways. Very little could make him queasy, as this foul deed had done. He stood, still seeing the

thing, rubbing his spread palms along his thighs. Had he been wearing saber or side-arm, he'd have used one on Chipman.

He said, "Why'd you shoot him?"

After a space of ringing silence, the flat was coming awake. Men were darting about, yelling. Inside the post, also, there was belated commotion. A sentry was bellowing, a bull's-eye went bobbing across the parade, feet began slapping hard-baked earth.

Chipman snarled, "Shut up, Keefe! I knew what I was doin'."

"Even cold-blood murder, Chip?"

"You fool! It was a measly Injun, Keefe, who was about to spoil our meat!" His glance shuttling about; he obviously was thinking fast. Seizing Jeff's arm, he said, "Come on! Get lost in the shuffle. It's looking like mess call."

Revulsion still roiling inside him, Jeff jerked his arm free and started past Chipman, toward the gate. He caught the Texan's explosive curse. Instinctively, he swung around. Chipman's carbine was a blur, swinging at his head. He ducked, lifting up his shoulders.

That saved him from the blow's full impact. Even so, the Spencer seemed to splinter against his temple, and he thought his neck was snapping. After the blow, his knees buckled under him.

He didn't lose consciousness entirely, and he was aware of struggling to push up, sit up, rise. After an eternity the din in his ears became voices, the dancing lights became blouse buttons and belt buckles and gun metal, glinting in a smoky compound of lantern rays and false dawn. Two troopers, one on either side, supported him as he faced Captain Sawyer.

SAWYER WAS an old Regular. He'd been a Dragoon under Scott in the Mexican War, winning his spurs at Churubusco. He was a brave man; also a relentless martinet. Keefe had sometimes wondered if that were the reason he'd been "lost in the files" since then, attaining but one promotion.

He certainly was unfit for field duty in the rebellion. His kind too often got shot accidentally by their own men. The frontier army was different. It needed its cat-of-nine-tails, its torture horse. It was tough—with its July recruits, its Eastern jail-bait, *and* its draft-dodgers.

Still, such a man in command anywhere was deplorable.

Around fifty, yet hard as nails, Sawyer had snapping black eyes under gray-frosted brows. He said now, harshly, "Answer up, trooper! I asked, what happened to you?"

Jeff's gaze jerked to the officer, breaking the long stare he had given Chipman. The sergeant stood behind Sawyer, slightly off to one side. He held the Spencer down-barrel in the crook of his right arm, and there was a calculating readiness in the measuring regard he fixed upon Jeff.

With thick tongue, aching jaw, Jeff said, "I don't know, sir. I was restless, had waked up. Hearing a stable noise, I came outside. Someone struck me from behind." His glance touched Chipman. "Carbine butt, I believe, sir."

"You saw nothing?"

Something about the negative phrasing sent a note of warning through Jeff. His eyes narrowed on the captain, whose scrutiny was more squint-lidded. "No, sir."

"So of course, you didn't recognize your assailant?"

It vibrated through Keefe like the notes of a strident trumpet: Was Sawyer in on the deal? Was he Chipman's inside leak? Could a man with so much Army service turn traitor? A million bucks were involved, and that was temptation, but there would be no personal profit.

He said, "No, sir, of course not."

He thought he saw, in the oily lantern-shine, a relief cross Sawyer's blunt, rock-hard features.

The soldiers were milling about excitedly. Low mumbling came from the overlanders, mingling in. A sleep-fogged lieutenant, buttoning his tunic, trotted up with saber clanking. Sawyer took his salute, gave him a sharp tone.

"I want order here, Mr. Trexler. Evacuate non-personnel. Double-check the

security." Over his shoulder: "Sergeant Chipman. Get this trooper in proper uniform and report him to Medical. Then return for a furtherance of inquiry."

"Yes, sir," said Chipman, moving toward Jeff.

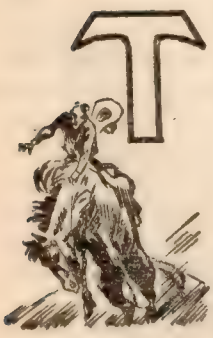
Shaking off his assistance, Jeff walked on his own power to the barracks. As he finished dressing, his troop-mates crowded around, some silent, some questioning. None paid much attention to Chipman who stood by, tall and trim. And resentful, Jeff thought.

In spite of his throbbing senses, Keefe reflected on that. Here in this skeleton-strength C Troop were a dozen-odd men who had served with Steve Chipman in Hood's Brigade in the Confederate Army. Between them was a close-knit bond, a sympathetic bond. It occurred to him that, while Chipman was a hail-fellow with them, they lacked something mutual in their relations with him.

Chipman's three stripes carried authority, but couldn't command a certain respect. Jeff sensed distrust. Maybe, he decided, they knew Steve's man-stripe, which Jeff had only learned tonight.

CHAPTER II

Suspicions



THE PARADE ground was sooty-gray with breaking day as they crossed it. Jeff's head pulsed with every unsteady step. Chipman, silent beside him, frequently shuffle-stepped to keep in time. Presently he said, softly, "I knew what I was doing, Keefe."

"Sure," Jeff agreed sarcastically. "After we cut our caper, we'll only have the whole Department of the Platte on our tails. You want to add the Sioux Nation for good measure."

Chipman grunted, nudging him with an elbow. They were approaching Officers' Row, and Jeff observed the shadowy form standing outside the door of Colonel Warner's quarters. It was Wanda, the daughter of the Old Man, who was a widower.

Touching the visors of their forage caps, they passed on. Jeff could feel her stare following him; he could also savor the lingering scent of her sachet. It was disturbing, and heady.

Chipman now said vehemently, "I just kept the Sioux out of our hair, that's all! If that Indian had talked to the C. O., or returned to his people, our goose was cooked. He had to be eliminated."

Jeff turned his body, favoring his stiff neck, to study the long Texan. His gray eyes narrowed. "How and why? You haven't shown all your cards. Showing them's the least you can do, since you're asking us to trust you."

Chipman grinned, showing white, square teeth in a humorless stretch of lips. "No can do, Keefe; not yet. The rest take my word for it. You'd better, too. And you better take this for a fact: cold-jaw on me again, and I'll damn-sure kill you! I'm dealin' this game. It's high stakes . . . Look ahead. She's watchin'."

Walking on, Jeff had an odd reflection that ruffled his flesh, his nerves. Chipman was a murderer. His geniality was a veneer, chipping off in stress. How much temptation, if they did successfully pull this play, could his base character resist?

Between buildings, Jeff caught a glimpse of Ryland on sentry-go, pacing Post Four as if nothing had happened. Jeff said, "You rigged it smooth, all right. You Sergeant of the Guard, Sawyer Officer of the Day."

Chipman said quickly, "Don't get the wrong idea there. Sawyer's not in on this. He's a duty-stricken wolf. Watch yourself around him. He's smellin' a mouse."

That, thought Jeff, is something I won't take your word for, either.

Reaching the post hospital, they saw the figure standing under the ramada, in the rectangle of light cast from the doorway. Her dress was calico, but she wore beaded moccasins and had a bright blanket drawn around her shoulders. Her hair, done in

twin strands, jumped along her neck when she turned and gave them a murky-black regard. She said nothing, and there was no flicker of expression on her wide, high-boned face.

It was a half-breed face, not unpretty, and sad at the moment.

She'd been the wife of Lance Corporal Grundy, recently killed on a patrol. Neither white nor red—some reckoned she was Pawnee, others Cheyenne—she had stayed on at the garrison as a spike, a laundress. The woman-starved troopers found her good for their morale.

With a final glance at Jeff, she moved off, along the wall and around a corner. Looking through the door, Jeff saw the object she'd been staring at. The young Teton had been dumped on the dirt floor of the room. Not even a respectful covering had been placed over his still-drawn features, and he stared sightlessly at the ceiling.

THE REGIMENTAL surgeon, Moore, was paunchy fat, bald, freckled as a turkey egg. A good deal of the alcoholic atmosphere in here emanated from him. He probably needed to drink, Jeff conceded.

The Eleventh, with its ragged companies holding down five scattered posts, burned up Moore's energy. He was on the go, dawn to dark, taking care of everything from the diarrhea blues to major surgery.

Jeff leaned weakly against a wall while Chipman spoke low with Moore, who was stitching the scalp of C Trooper Gentry. The latter, unconscious, was an Indiana man, a cripple yet doing "duty west." He'd been on the south gate and, from the appearance of his head, he'd been roughly used.

Steve, likely, had disposed of him.

Jeff glanced at the trooper in the corner —Ellison, ex-reb, a Tennessee Tom, and in on the set-up. He had a bandaged brow, but by his knowing grin, Jeff knew it was a superficial wound, a cover-up. Ellison had been on the guardhouse post.

Jeff told himself it was foolish to get so wrought up over the murder of a savage. Whatever the circumstances compelling it, they were trivial compared to the impending affair. The survival of a nation, a cause, hung in the balance.

Still he began to feel like a criminal.

He looked at the Indian again, afterwards averting his glance. When Chipman strode out, he shifted to the door, watching him cross the parade. He saw Wanda Warner halt the sergeant, talking with him for a long space.

In fact, they talked too long.

The doctor was a friendly person to have such a clammy-cold touch, Jeff thought, wincing under Moore's ministrations. Clipping blood-matted hair from his temple, Moore harumphed, saying, "You took a nasty blow." He gave the pronoun a "yew" sound. "Could 've cracked your head like an egg-shell."

With waves of pain revived, Jeff didn't talk. As Moore shuffled about, his loose frock aflutter like a cassock, he hummed softly. Jeff, despite his throbbing senses, caught himself trying to identify the tune. He gave up, biting his lips as Moore used a carbolic wash.

Later, his cranium wrapped in tight linen, he relaxed and listened to the surgeon say: "You're a typical hard-headed trooper. Take my advice. Better play catch, or you really might get hurt."

Keefe stiffened, squinting. It was a diffused, fuzzy gray in the room, daylight mixing with the cone of smoky kerosene light. He couldn't bring Moore into a sharp focus. He asked, "What do you mean?"

Moore laughed. "Man, do you think I haven't been about army posts long enough to smell out trouble? After all, a doctor, civilian or military, hears and sees a lot. And keeps his mouth shut, too. So don't worry. I got my hands full without getting tangled up in anything you Dixie-boys are brewing. That's Colonel Warner's department, not mine."

He chuckled again. "All five of these Platte posts are powder kegs. I hope I'm at some other one when this one blows up. Now bend your head. I want to knead

these neck muscles. And you're suffering some shock, need rest. No stable call this morning."

Jeff Keefe, his brain muddier than ever, thought the medico's hands were icy-cold.

Moore returned him to duty in the middle of the morning. The post was bustling under a brassy, dry-sucking sun. Skirting the quad, Jeff observed Sergeant Chipman putting C Troop through mounted drill, bleach-white dust fogging under the horses' bellies.

For a moment he paused before the orderly room, absorbing all the familiar sights, sounds, and liking them. The crisp bark of voices, the jingle of horse equipment, the talking trumpets, the clang of the blacksmith. This had been his life; still was. Soon it would be broken, and he wondered if ever it could be resumed. If not, he knew his existence would be barren.

A SKIMPY patrol went riding out, led by B's junior officer, a shavetail named Kerr. No, he corrected himself, Kerr was now senior officer, *only* officer, since First Lieutenant Brantley was killed in that Arapaho skirmish. He stood with his sober gaze following that forked guidon, with its red B on a white field, its white US on a red field.

It sent a tingle through him, as it always had done, and it seemed like yesterday when he'd followed his first guidon. A middle-class Virginia youth, he'd been unusually lucky in securing his appointment to West Point.

By his own ability and hard drive, he earned his commission in the United States Army.

He'd lost his green under some big men, like Hooker and Johnston. With the First Dragoons in Texas, under the command of one Robert E. Lee, he'd changed the color of his bars, from gold to silver. And then at twenty-six, holding the world in the palm of his hand, he heard the shot at Sumter that was to divide a nation.

Resigning his commission, he answered the call of his state, as did countless others. Unlike most, he did it without truculent enthusiasm. He'd fought through the war.

At Sharpsburg, in the Bloody Lane, he took a Minié ball. For hours he lay pinned down by another wounded soldier, both helpless while the artillery hell raged around them. That was his meeting with Steve Chipman, of Hood's Texans. They had been together ever since.

They spent months in the pest-hole prison at Rock Island, awaiting exchanges from Libby. Then as a stern war measure, that practice was abolished. Hope gone, they accepted the offer to serve on the frontier, Indian duty. That no rebel could hold a commission in the U. S. Army mattered not to Jeff.

He'd been happier as a second louie than as a Major in the CSA.

"Never once," he said, "did I fire on that flag, Old Glory, but what I remembered I had ridden under it. I always felt like the bullet was striking me in the heart."

Steve Chipman said, "The boys all swear by you. This war's not done; we may yet smack 'em a whack." He had paused, then asked pointedly, "If the chance came, you'd help the South, Dixie-boy, wouldn't you?"

It stumped Jeff, for he hadn't considered such a thing.

He thought, Out there in Indian country, there's small likelihood of any chance to help the South. We'll be busy protecting our top-knots.

He said evasively, "I'm a Virginian, Chip."

But fate had crossed him up proper. Miles west, on the fringe of the Sierra Nevadas, near a silver-bellied mountain, was a boom camp called Virginia City.

Silver and gold help win wars, and there was a steady flow of this eastward. At first it had been a pronged flow, some to Richmond, some to Washington. Then the plains blockade became effective, and the Confederacy got very little. Occasionally a raider outfit, like Quantrill's, would tap the traffic.

The day Jeff's draft arrived at Cottonwood, a silver shipment, under trooper

escort, came in and rolled out. There was another several weeks later.

IN THE DAYS that followed, he was aware of Steve's subterranean doings. Steve was a mixer, a politician. A surface leader who could handle these sullen, balky ex-rebs. He'd got his stripes on the strength of this.

Jeff was one of the last Chipman confided in. "It's a natural, Keefe—a jackpot waitin' to be raked in! Know how much was in that last wagonload? Nigh a cool million! What's to prevent us from takin' over the next run?"

Jeff didn't answer. Steve gestured, snorted. "This bob-tail battalion of greenhorns and misfits? Its cripples and culled officers? Shucks, after I organize it, we'll do it in a cake-walk. The boys are for it." He waited for Jeff to commit himself. "Well? You're always readin' about Fabius and Hannibal. How about the Trojan Horse deal?"

Jeff said, "It could be done."

"Then you're with us, ain't you? That money could lift Fightin' Bob Lee off his knees, maybe. Told you there was always a chance, didn't I?"

Jeff Keefe had slowly nodded. . . .

Snapping back to the present, he became conscious of the quiet that had settled over the stockade. Looking toward the main gate, he saw the reason. A column of weary troopers on fagged horses was entering. Dust covered them like talcum. Several mules, packing the water bags of the dry march, were shunted aside. A Mitchell wagon, with Telegraph Corps inscribed on its side, drawn by six plodding draft animals, also quartered out of line.

The rest of the column came on. Jeff frowned. Chipman had it that this was to be a pick-up escort for a bullion shipment from Robinson, the next fort west. Apparently Steve's tip was wrong.

Some of the tension left Jeff's body. There was a transitory relief on his features as he studied the officer leading the column.

Major—Brevet-Colonel—Warner had worn the bright plumage of his profession. A brilliant officer, he'd been with Fremont in California. In the Rebellion, he'd got off to a fine start, receiving his brevet, while some of his gallant actions were compared with those of Custer, the boy wonder.

Then at Fredricksburg, in the catastrophe that cost Burnside his command, Warner bungled orders. He came through, with his white horse so blood-splattered it looked like a roan, but his regiment, horribly decimated, lost its colors. This had started Warner on his long Siberian road.

So now, in the tatters of former glory, he was a pathetic figure, bewildered and unpredictable. Sometimes a spark of his old confidence flashed, but mostly he was a growling dog, past his prime.

Jeff thought, A purgatory post, a ragtag rank and file, a washed-out commandant. Yes, a batch of fighting-fool rebels could turn the trick. As he entered the orderly room, he felt sorry for Warner, and he was glad today was not it . . .

He finished the morning on stable fatigue, and getting his leather in order. He heard the rumble, without explosion however, from Headquarters as Warner opened his own inquiry into the murder outrage that had been committed within his very precinct.

At noon mess, lacking appetite, Jeff was cleaning his rolling-block Remington—his personal property, this sadly-lacking army gratefully allowing its EM to supply personal weapons of standard calibre—when Chipman stalked in.

A towering rage possessed the sergeant, but he had it in restraint. His step, catlike on the balls of his feet, was nonetheless violent, and his voice, at whisper level, was a frustrated shout.

He said, "They didn't make the contact. I know the stuff was due. The wire came through several days ago."

He glared at Jeff, whose silence irked him. Jeff shrugged. "We can wait—unless that Sioux stunt fouled things."

Steve said, through gritted teeth, "It didn't!" and left the barrack.

JEFF WAS overly glum when he went out with the daily water detail to the river, half a mile distant. The five troopers with him were Southerners. The third barrel was being filled before anyone spoke.

Upshaw, a grizzled Texan, said, "Major, we sure wish you'd make up your mind."

Jeff looked at him sharply. It flashed through him that Doc Moore had told him to do the same. He wondered if his indecision was so obvious.

He said, "Why, I'm stringing along with you boys."

Upshaw reflected. "Then you think it's on the up and up? I mean, that Steve ain't holdin' no cards up his sleeve? See, we know him. He's a humdinger in a scrap, but he looks out for Number One first. That'll be a heap of money and plenty of fightin' before we reach Dixie soil. Lots could happen, without any explanation. Like this Injun come-off. What was it?"

Jeff shook his head.

Upshaw said, "We'd trust your judgment and opinion."

Jeff studied the brackish water, which was run through a hell-spitter at the post before consumption. He pinched at a wiggler. Upshaw's observation was not exactly new to him, but his own problems had overshadowed its consideration.

He finally said, "I'm not losing sleep over Chip. It's the treachery of the deed itself. Before, when I saw I could not honorably wear the blue, I resigned. Now I must break my oath by mutiny, desertion, theft."

"We know the penalty if we lose," said Mapes, a Georgian. "And we're willin' to gamble. Besides, it's for General Lee, and this is war. Them Yanks don't figure us as honorable."

Keefe gave him a bitter grin. "No? They returned my arms and my Chicopee sword, and my wallet with personal papers, when I swore myself out of Rock Island." He splashed the water with a palm. "Hell, I'm just one of the bunch. We can make our try—if ever the bullion comes through."

They made no further comment, still were uncertain. He felt their glances. It was hot in the scrubby cottonwoods. But the sweat beading his brow and upper lip, Jeff knew, was the same sweat that had waked him up, drenching his body, for so many nights of late.

Leaving with the barrel-loaded wagon, they passed the ford. Jeff, trudging behind, slowed down to stare at the tracks made recently by Colonel Warner's column.

The Mitchell, it appeared, had almost bogged. It's wide-tread wheels had grooved deeply, and the loam gouging of the six horses' hoofs showed the strain of their pull. Jeff frowned. That telegraph equipment—a bona fide load, for he'd glimpsed it in passing—wasn't as heavy as this water haul.

And six horses. Why? Double teams were usually sufficient.

CHAPTER III

A Double-Cross

UPON HIS return, Jeff Keefe expected to be summoned before Colonel Warner's board of investigation, but wasn't. Something big was astir. Half of D Troop was saddling up in the corral.

He questioned a corporal who passed, and the man said evasively, "Faith, me boy, leave me say me prayers. The Old Man will get us kilt entirely." The corporal hurried on.

Keefe caught a glimpse then of Warner entering the infirmary across the parade. He was staring that way when the fingers touched his arm. He turned, his eyes barely dropping to meet Wanda Warner's.

Jeff Keefe was a medium five-eleven, while she was tall for a girl. Tall, graceful, feminine. And the last was not merely because she was one of the few women in this hungry male environment.

Her skin was a lovely cocoa-tone, her eyes amber-flecked. Sunlight was trapped winkingly in her auburn, bun-done hair. Two years in this harsh land, at her father's side, had left no mark on her.

She said, "May we talk a moment?" When he delayed answer: "Please. It is important."

Nodding, he stepped around the storehouse corner, not from prying eyes, but into scant shade afforded by the low wall. Her presence was a tantalizing thing, and he would not deceive himself by discounting a desire.

She said, "For some reason I'm not one of your favorite people in this garrison, Mr. Keefe. But please help me. What's happening here? You know!"

Though regarding her coolly, he was remembering her warmly. How beautiful she'd been that night at the Enlisted Men's Hop, shortly after his arrival. She'd worn silk, angel sleeves, a hoop. She'd been a belle.

She'd taken him back, centuries back, to oak lined drives and white-pillared mansions and romantic moonlight.

She'd been frisky, too. Then and ever since. For a Yankee gal, she showed a preference for Southern boys.

He said, "Having failed to flatter information from the others, what makes you think I'm susceptible?" The genuine hurt on her features gave him no pleasure; he suddenly was sorry. "I was rude, miss. I know of nothing wrong."

His answer angered her, and she was disappointed, *and fearful.* Unable to hide her anxiety, she shook her head. "I thought only Dixie girls were accomplished liars!" She tilted her head defiantly. "Now I shall be rude, Major. You're probably the brains of this dissension. Your crowd worships you. I've found that out by—by snooping, if you wish to call it that. Don't pretend it's news to you. It's a fine loyalty, if you don't mislead them.

"We thought it a noble gesture, you Seceshes willing to protect our frontier. After all, it is ours—yours and mine, whoever wins. But you only joined us to make strife! Let me warn you: my father's no fool. He's had tough luck, and maybe his sense of timing is gone, and maybe some confidence. Wondering if this procedure is right, or that, or if—"

Jeff cut in softly, "I understand, miss. I've borne command, and it's a crushing weight. I admire you for helping the Colonel." He grinned, disarmingly. "Even by snooping."

Her mouth snapped shut, then relaxed in a half-smile. "Thank you. I—we are a long way from the war. Can't we leave it there and be friends?"

"It would be a pleasure." His guilt impinged upon him. "What is your father planning?"

She studied the palpitating parade. "A peaceful Indian was murdered in our midst. Father shall return the body, try to explain and discuss indemnity."

He said, "No, that's crazy!"

"We call it being honorable."

When she turned away angrily, he said, "Wait!"

He didn't try to analyze it. It was just something innate, like fair play, or refusal to strike a defenseless person. He told her, "Miss, I believe your father has some precious telegraph equipment yonder. He should watch it."

She eyed him intently, yet without a change of expression, then left.

COLONEL WARNER, erect yet weary, was striding toward headquarters now. Jeff watched him a moment before stirring. When he turned, he saw the breed widow, Mrs. Grundy.

She stood at the edge of Soapsuds Row, yonder in a corner of the post. Staring steadily at him, she gestured slightly, beckoningly, with her dark head. When he hesitated, she repeated it. Jeff, puzzled, glanced around before going toward her. Or after her, for she had padded down the row of sod huts, entering one.

Sounds interrupted Jeff. The main gate swung open, to a background of emigrant babbling, and admitted B's patrol. Young Kerr's urgency was plain to see. Before the long 'dobe, he faced and dismissed the

troopers, then stood to horse. When Warner appeared, he made his report.

Jeff slanted out and joined Josh Briley, late of the Virginia Legion.

Josh said, "We ran into some of Buffalo Hump's braves. Not a huntin' party, either—a regular paint party."

"No!" said Keefe.

"Yes, we did, Maje. We spied a pair first, ridin' in circles toward the fort here. Trailin' horse sign, I'd say, from their actions. They saw us, turned back, and we scouted 'em. Found the big party in that sandy blow-out by the river loop. We had no fightin' orders, so here we be."

They walked along together, Jeff silent.

"Somethin' else, Maje. I saw that paloosey hoss in their band. Not many of them spot-rumps around here, you know. It must've headed straight back to the Indian herd." He fumbled. "Would you mind tellin' me what was behind that killin'? We're all curious."

"I don't know," Jeff said. "Ask Steve Chipman."

Abruptly remembering the breed girl, he cut back that way.

Heat shimmered from the windowless wall as he came up to her door, which was frame-hung with porous cheesecloth. Before he could knock, he heard the muffled voice inside. There was a report like the smack of an inflated bag by a hand, and the voice cursed.

Opening the door, Jeff stepped over the dirt threshold. The room was small, oven-hot, clean. And bare of personal touches. The bunk bore no cover, the bureau-washstand was empty, a drawer half out. In a chair was a kit bag.

The girl cowered in a corner, confronted there by Captain Sawyer, whose arm was still drawn back, with palm poised for another slap.

Neither was aware of Jeff, and Sawyer was saying, low yet thick with rage: "You Indian wench, tell me what's up! Why are you packed to leave? I saw you talk with that Sioux buck through the guardhouse window last night; then I saw you talk with Sergeant Chipman. What about?"

She merely stared at him, defiantly, her black eyes alive with helpless hatred. Sawyer's patience broke. He snarled, "Talk, damn you!" and struck her, with a fist that had clenched during the movement of his arm. Jeff heard the crack of his knuckles against her cheekbone.

As an officer, leading men, Jeff Keefe had developed an equable temper. Now his control snapped. With three lunging strides, he reached Sawyer, flinging him around. When Sawyer lashed a fist at him, he instinctively uncorked a right and left into the captain's face.

Sawyer bounced against the wall, reeling as he held his feet. A trickle of blood coursed from the corner of his mouth. Slowly straightening, he regarded Jeff with a vicious gleam of satisfaction.

He said, "That finishes you, Jeff Keefe."

With full knowledge of his act, Jeff had a sick moment, and a subconscious hope that Sawyer would continue the fight. But Sawyer had had enough.

Jeff said, "If you mean a court, Mr. Sawyer, I'd venture that it would finish you also. Conduct unbecoming an officer."

"Why, I'll be— With a half-breed squaw?"

"With the wife of a deceased soldier, killed in line of duty."

There was a deadlocked silence before Sawyer croaked, "You fool!" He laughed. "Think I don't know you turncoats are plotting something? I've got loyal men staked on each of you, watching, waiting for you to open the play. I've taken you, because you're the instigator."

Jeff had the detached thought: Why do they all conclude I'm the leader?

Sawyer gloated. "An outcast regiment manning five forgotten stations, under an egg-head commandant. Tailor-cut for you, wasn't it? And for me, too. It will be my passport from this oblivion when I tramp on you never-die rebels."

ABSORBED by the naked display of emotion on Sawyer's features, Jeff was caught short when the officer, twisting his body, suddenly whipped out his Army .44. Scalp aprickle, Jeff stared into the cap-and-ball's barrel.

Sawyer said, "This time is good as any to start the coup. Get rid of you, the brains, and your rabble will be easy." He tipped the muzzle. "One thing—what's the game? I thought it might tie in with the bullion runs through here, until this morning's affair. Is it an all-out Indian war you're fomenting?"

Jeff said nothing, his brain butting a wall.

The Colt clicked to half-cock.

Then a voice spoke from the doorway. "Uncock that piece, Mr. Sawyer, and sheath it—or I'll blast a tunnel in you a trooper can ride through."

Sawyer's countenance was a mask of fury and surprise, as he made a quarter turn to face the speaker. Jeff pivoted his head.

The surgeon, Moore, clad in dress flannel and corded campaign hat, with a .47 Paterson in his chubby fist, said, "Didn't you understand me, Thaddeus?"

"Yes," husked Sawyer, and Jeff heard the rasp of dropped hammer metal on the gun.

Moore entered the room, pausing at Jeff's shoulder. Jeff smelled his whisky aura. Moore didn't holster his weapon, and Sawyer watched it with a wide-eyed, fearful anticipation.

The surgeon said, "There, Keefe, you observe a cowardly, frustrated brute. Afraid I'll kill him. Of course this is your party. What'll it be?"

Moore's attention remained on Sawyer, and Jeff, measuring the medico, abruptly realized how mistaken he'd been. Moore wasn't fat or soft; he was heavy and hard. His loose-fitting clothes gave that false impression. There was a craft behind that mottled face. He was a pliable man, and dangerous.

Moore repeated, "What shall we do with him?"

"I don't know," Jeff said, his mind crowded with fresh angles. Captain Sawyer definitely was not Steve's traitor in brass.

Could it be—

"I'll drop the matter, if he does," he ventured tentatively.

"You will?" Moore asked sarcastically. He still didn't look away from Sawyer, but obviously he was thinking hard, keeping Jeff in the corner of his vision. "I shan't wonder about you much longer, Keefe. Sergeant Chipman says you are a sentimental fool. I've been charitable, believing you had to make up your mind. We need you—but not badly. Let me know how you stand, man!"

Jeff wasn't stunned by the revelation, but at the moment he didn't know which of these two men he had the most loathing for.

"I'll decide when the time comes, Major," he said, sparingly.

"The time has come. That fortune is inside this post right now." Jeff saw Sawyer's head jerk erect, and so did Moore, who went on: "See, Thad, your superior doesn't trust you enough to confide in you. He even suspicions you are in with these fire-eaters. He asked me, however, to watch the stuff while he's gone to Buffalo Hump's camp."

He flicked a glance to Jeff, smirking. "Our luck has snowballed, Keefe. Colonel Warner is taking almost half the garrison. After we dispose of our would-be Nemesis here, Mr. Sawyer—"

Rebellion galvanized Jeff. Swinging full face to Moore, he grabbed at the Paterson. Moore blocked the thrust, came up violently against him. Quick as a wrestler, with his free left hand, he seized Jeff's arm in a twisting vise, flipping Jeff's body around. In agony Jeff dropped to his knees. And now Moore was on him, applying pressure to his neck, at the base of his skull.

Jeff's senses, impressions became odd, jerky. He knew that Moore, above him, was barely moving. Sawyer still stood in the same spot, frozen by fear, covered by Moore's Colt. The Indian girl, crouched like an animal, was inching along the wall toward the door.

Jeff remembered the instructor at the Point, who'd introduced judo. He could see nothing now. Before he passed out, the explosion of a gun jarred his eardrums.

CHAPTER IV

Moore's Mistake

WITH brassy shrillness, a trumpet was blowing Recall, and there were gauzy shadows in the room when Jeff came to. He lay on a shakedown. Lifting on an elbow, he oriented himself. He was in the guardhouse.

He had company, but for a moment the outside quiet of the post registered with him. Usually, when day's duty was done, there was a pleasant lilt of voices, camaraderie. Now voices were pitched low, almost inaudible above the tramp of boots and related sounds.

He looked at the others. Doc Moore, with a bland bedside manner, was squatting beside him. Wanda Warner and Lieutenant Kerr stood beyond.

He flinched when Moore reached over and twitched an eyelid.

The Major said, "Still groggy—pupils dilated." He rose, clasping hammy hands across his paunch as he stared down. "We're puzzled as to what occurred, trooper. Did you faint after you shot Captain Sawyer? We found you slumped on the floor, out like a light."

Jeff didn't answer. So that blast had been Moore's disposition of an obstacle. Why hadn't Moore shot him also? His bleak gaze didn't ruffle Moore.

"You put a hole in Mr. Sawyer a yellowleg could ride through. Messy."

Kerr asked, "Is he able to be questioned?"

"Later would be better." Humming softly, Moore regarded Jeff. "Unless he wants to make a statement now."

It was a challenge, and if Jeff accepted it, a death warrant. Moore's arms were akimbo on his hips, innocent yet poised, a hand near the .47 Colt. Jeff shook his head, and then, before framing a question, studied Wanda.

Kerr stood stiff with contempt, but she showed a mental confusion, her eyes probing him. Her red underlip was caught between white teeth.

Looking off, Jeff said, "What about Corporal Grundy's widow?"

The hush was so profound he heard her sibilant intake of breath, and he could not resist glancing at her. He knew she would misunderstand, and her disgust rolled over him like a wave. He could imagine her thoughts: He'd killed Sawyer over that hybrid female.

Sawyer's conquests along Soapsuds Alley were not unknown.

Moore said, "The lady"—he accented the word—"seems to have disappeared. I searched for her, but she is not on the post."

Jeff frowned, though he believed the surgeon. He recalled how she had been set for flight. Her absence might puzzle Moore, but not perturb him. After all, she couldn't foil his plans. She might help Jeff at his courts-martial, but by then Moore would be long gone.

It was her mix-up in the Teton's murder that had Jeff wondering about her.

In leaving, Moore told Jeff, "I'll drop in after Retreat, trooper. If you need me before, call. Remember I'm only a medical officer and, like the chaplain, interested solely in your welfare."

After he closed the door, his slimy, clammy presence lingered, and Jeff rose and paced the floor to break the spell.

The colors were down, mess was over, and night had swooped across the tawny sandhills with typical abruptness. Instead of relaxation, it brought a tension that could be felt in the garrison.

Soldiers moved through the pattern of lamplight, but they were nervous, solemn. The sutler's was quiet, almost shunned. Jeff stood clenching the bars of his window and listened to the hour call echo from guard posts.

His thoughts kept polarizing around the one question: Why hadn't Moore eliminated him? It would have been simple to kill Jeff along with Sawyer. He knew it must be a selfish reason with Moore.

THE surgeon hadn't come yet, as he'd promised. Jeff hoped he wouldn't come, for he wanted no visitors. Or so he thought until the two forms approached the window, whispering his name. He startled them by answering in their faces.

Upshaw, the Texan, said, "Don't fret, Major. You just be ready. We-all aim to get you out tonight."

"Where's Chip?"

Briley, the Virginian, said, "He rode out with the Colonel's column, a little while before Kerr and Moore discovered you."

"Steve didn't like it, neither. Fact, he was scared and mad. Scared to ride into Buffler Hump's front yard, packin' his dead son. Mad because this was the perfect set-up."

"Yep," said Briley. "We were sure surprised when Steve came in and told us we'd whirl the wheel tonight—that we'd nearly had the wool pulled over our eyes, the stuff already bein' here. Then the Colonel's orderly brought word for him to accompany the colyum. The regular interpreter had got powerful sick. Steve blows up, says everything's off until he returns."

"Which don't cut no ice with us, Major. We're springin' you, then doin' as you-all say. It's your show. Be ready around—"

He broke off as a voice barked at them from the gloom. The guardhouse sentry was coming on the trot. They faded, likewise on the trot.

The loyalty of such men made Jeff feel better, and a belated understanding swept through him. He was their leader, although everyone else had perceived it before himself. Moore might disparage this, and Chipman organize them, but Keefe was the one they looked to for approval and execution.

He squatted down, back to wall, thinking, waiting.

Doc Moore didn't show up. When tattoo sounded, Jeff went to the window and watched the post black out. The silence and darkness took on an oppressive substance. Through cracks of the front gate, he saw firelight of the emigrants, but there was no noise.

Some time after the ten o'clock call, he turned aside. As he did, the guard-room door opened, limning Moore in light. He entered, closed the door and for a taut space neither spoke in the pitch-dark cell.

Then the surgeon said, "Last chance, Keefe. Your balky reb friends won't accept me, won't budge. Which is why I didn't kill you. I anticipated such, for whether Chipman thinks so or not, you're their tin god. They claim they'll break you out if I don't. I can, and I'm willing—if you play catch. If not, you're of no further value to me. They'll break out a corpse. What'll it be?"

Jeff said, "I'll play catch."

Taps wasn't blown at Cottonwood that night. The mutineers struck at Call to Quarters, and fifteen minutes later the coup was complete. Instead of lulling trumpet strains, harsh voices and hubbub filled the air.

There was some firing, bullets spatting into sod walls or logs. Intimidation, mostly, by the Southerners. A few Regulars got roughed up before realizing the futility of resistance.

For weeks the general strategy had been hashed, rehashed by the butternut boys. It was flexible. They caught the Federals in sleep, at least under cover of darkness. The Federals found rifle racks locked, personal arms missing. In the confusion that ensued, a pair of mutineers could handle a half dozen of them.

It wasn't like meeting a common, known enemy. This was the payoff on friction within, on suspicion and distrust. Many had recruited for this service to avoid contact with the gray clad foe, and now the rebel yell was ringing in their ears, and the wily devils stalking them from pitch black cover.

Jeff felt quivery, not proud, as he watched the half-garrison herded, like so many criminals, onto the lighted parade ground. He felt the corrosion of dishonor. This wasn't war; it was treachery.

The rioters were in an uproar outside, watched warily by a new wall guard. Upshaw appeared with the key to the cell, and soon Jeff Keefe as standing outside

of the guardhouse, observing the mutineers complete their successful conquest of the fort.

Upshaw exulted, "We sure done it, Major!" Seeing Moore approach, he sobered, saying, "Watch that scalawag. If he'll betray his own kind, he'll try it with us. Glad as I am to get the jump on Steve, believe I'd prefer him to this Judas sawbones."

MOORE appeared drunker, or else was flushed with wicked pleasure. He and Jeff had teamed to take over Officers' Row. The three lieutenants were in the guardhouse. "Congratulations, Mr. Keefe," Moore said. "We work well together, as I was confident would be the case. What next?"

Jeff was debating. "De-horse the post, much as I hate to. We'll take relay mounts for our forced march, scatter the rest. When Colonel Warner returns, he can round up most. We'll have a good start."

Moore said, "Good. Collect the arms. I'll bring a wagon around."

"No. We can't leave them unarmed in Indian country."

"Sure, we can. Those guns will sell—that is—aid the Confederacy immensely. We take them."

Jeff tensed, his Remington repeater almost leveling.

Upshaw reflected: "The South could use them weepons, Major."

"Of course," agreed Moore, as if the matter were settled. "I need a detail to unload that telegraph junk, too. Let's shake it up, Keefe."

Grinning, he turned away.

Jeff said, "Doc, tell me something." Moore pivoted back. "What's your reason for this?"

Moore pursed his lips, mulling that. "Maybe several. I might be one of those Copperheads taking advantage of my first opportunity to serve the enemy. Or I might have a grudge against this Army—hitting it where it'll hurt."

When he finished, Jeff said, "Couldn't be that you want that fortune in your kick?"

Moore's eyes were narrowed to slits, but he laughed, soundlessly. "That'd be a damn good reason, Keefe. Take your pick, only let's get rolling."

Less than an hour after they launched their revolt, they were ready to ride out. An armed minority, isolated in swells of buffalo grass, they had made their mark on the pages of the war.

Jeff sat heavy in his saddle, studying the padlocked barracks which held the disgraced remnant of Cottonwood. He thought of Kerr, the eager lieutenant, and others; and he was immune to his men's enthusiasm.

It was the burden of command, he told himself. This thing had a long way to go yet. There would be no more surprise punching.

He looked once, reluctantly, toward Colonel Warner's set, where the women had been collected. He jerked his gaze away. For they stood in a blob mass beneath the arbor, helplessly watching with a defiant contempt. He could almost distinguish Wanda in the group.

Moore drove the Mitchell over. It was a special wagon, sloping of sides, its box 6 by 6 by 15, duck-lashed. Nearly 3000 pounds capacity. Moore appeared small on the seat, as he sat with his foot on the brake lever. He looked chubby, cherubic.

The mutineers quieted as Jeff faced them. He listened briefly to the changed note of the emigrants' babbling beyond the walls, then formed up his followers, and issued orders: "By fours through the gate, men. Watch those overlanders. No unnecessary fire. Moore, fall in middle of column. Ready?" He called to the dismounted pair at the gate. "Open them."

The din outside had abruptly died. The rasp of slot bars was audible, the squeal of hinges as the double frames split inward. Jeff raised an arm, then gasped and froze.

With uncanny timing, a wild figure came staggering through the entrance. Emigrants crowded around him in a crescent, keeping at a discreet distance though, as if he were a specter. The man's tunic hung in strips, his britches were

torn, his jackboots flopping-soled. Gray hair fell about his features.

It was Colonel Warner.

Jeff jumped his horse forward, hit ground, caught the figure as it collapsed.

Order broke now, everyone pushing around. Moore scrambled from his high seat, trotted over to stand above Jeff, who was cradling the bloodied, bruised commander in his arms. Jeff, disregarding Moore, told a trooper: "Fogg, bring Miss Warner."

IN THE lantern and torch light, Warner had a feverish, unfocused stare. When he began mumbling, Jeff bent closer. Quiet fell.

"They trapped us," Warner muttered. "Sergeant Chipman—in league with Buffalo Hump. They were waiting to attack. Split my force—pinned them down—left me for dead. It's all my fault."

Jeff had calmed him when Wanda pressed through. She was breathless, but not flustered. When she sank down beside her father, Jeff matched her steady stare. He said, "We'll fetch a litter," and rose.

He turned to confront the surgeon. In the long, measuring regard that passed between them open violence was balanced precariously upon the thin edge of restraint.

Jeff glowered. "Did you know about Chipman and Buffalo Hump?" he asked Moore.

The surgeon scratched his chin. "Sort of roundabout. Chipman said he could work up an arrangement that might help us. He was some Indian himself, you know—Kickapoo, Lipan or something."

"You lie! You knew the Sioux were about to attack, yet you meant to leave this post unarmed, at their mercy, the women unprotected."

Moore grinned, shrugged. "Still will."

After a stunned silence, Upshaw exclaimed, "Are you crazy, man!"

Moore swung on him. "Crazy? Who isn't? You lost-cause rebs are. Those fool home-seeking emigrants are. Those draft-dodging soldiers are. The country itself is crazy. But I know what I'm doing!"

He took several steps, his gaze studying the half-troop. "You know my cargo. I'm taking it out, now, regardless. If you're smart, you'll go with me, instead of listening to this sentimental cluck." He indicated Jeff. "It's a cinch. Chipman has it fixed. The Sioux won't touch us."

He walked away, leaving stark silence. The men glanced at one another, their collective attention settling on Jeff. Instinctively, they began shifting, opening a lane between him and the retreating medico.

Jeff called, "Don't c r a c k a whip, Moore."

Moore kept walking. He reached the Mitchell, climbed deliberately to the seat. Slowly he shook out the lines, kicked off the brakes, rolled into motion. As he drew abreast of Jeff, Jeff called again, "Halt, Doc."

Moore lashed the teams. Jeff's Remington jumped level, blasted out. As the wagon went past, the surgeon's body slid off the seat, struck a wheel rim and was deflected ploppingly to hard-packed earth.

After that, except for two men bringing the teams under control, matters came to a standstill. Jeff stood slump-shouldered, eyes downcast. A mutineer moved closer to say, "You done right, sir. We couldn't trust that joker. He wasn't on anybody's side. Probably he had an Injun ambush waitin' for us."

Wanda, walking beside the litter-bearers, paused beyond him. When he looked up, she gave him a wan smile and went on.

It was the hardest decision Jeff had ever made. He stood in the gate, scanning the moon-bleached land. Mapes, Upshaw and Briley were with him. Sensing his mental conflicts, they waited. Prairie stars were winking out as mists floated in from the river.

At last he said, "If you change the route, maybe you can cross up Chip. He won't know about this development."

Mapes said, "And you?"

"I'm staying here."

"Then so are we-all!"

"No, boys. I have my reasons. Besides,

the penalty for mutiny—"

"Is the same as for desertion and murder," put in Briley. "We're in the same boat, Maje, and we're stickin' together." He scuffed the ground with a boot toe. "I been thinkin', too. If there be an attack, some of them Yanks 'll need moral support. If we can scare the daylights out of them, what'll wild Injuns do?"

Upshaw said, "It's touchy, givin' 'em back their weepons. But I reckon we can watch 'em. Odds are about right—four to one."

Jeff said, "Think hard, boys. You still have a chance." When they eyed him adamantly, he grunted. "All right, all right, then! Mapes, discipline these emigrants. We can't leave them outside, but I don't want them underfoot. Briley, get the telegraph wire open and talk with Fort Reynolds or Wadsworth, if you can. They might send support."

Standing with a peculiar let-down of tension, he grinned at Upshaw. The Texan said, "We're not crazy, like Moore claimed, are we? We're just damn fools, huh?"

"Could be," admitted Jeff. "I'm wondering why Chip, being in with Buffalo Hump, murdered the chief's son."

"No tellin'." Upshaw suddenly stiffened, touched Jeff's arm, pointing. "You was wrong, Major. We didn't have a chance, after all."

CHAPTER V

Payment for Murder

IN THE murky moonlight, fires were springing up along the horizon, across its rim's length. They shone like fuzzy beacons through the vaporish night. Squatting down, ears to ground, Jeff and Upshaw picked up the vibrations of hoofbeats. Now and then faint owl calls drifted in through the silence of the night.

They were closing the gates when Briley trotted up to report the telegraph line was down. Fort Cottonwood was on its own, isolated.

They released the Yanks, assembling them on the parade. Jeff, having put out a temporary wall guard, came and spoke to the dressed ranks. He said:

"We haven't been a unit on this post. We've been fighting the war on a petty scale. Tonight, now, we must dissolve our differences. Otherwise we may not survive. I understand Buffalo Hump has five thousand warriors. How many are encircling us, I do not know.

"This station has so far been fortunate. Many of you will receive your baptism of fire at dawn. They will not attack before then. We have time to make ready. Above all, from this moment on, we must have confidence in one another.

"Lieutenant Kerr!"

Kerr came forward. His jauntiness, contempt had vanished. This raw youth, who had almost stampeded from a handful of braves, was frightened now, bewildered. Jeff, remembering his own first real test, sought to ease Kerr. Saluting, he said, "My apologies, sir. Here is your command. You will find all the arms in the wagon yonder."

Kerr fumblingly returned the salute, and the interval became strained, his uncertainty apparent. Jeff tensed when a voice spoke behind him. Wanda Warner came walking into his view, addressing the officer:

"Lieutenant, may I respectfully make a suggestion. Army regulations have gone overboard tonight, so this situation must be considered. My father knows Private Keefe's record. He has campaigned in Texas, against the Comanches. As a commissioned officer, he has led men under two flags. He would be most valuable in an advisory capacity. Would you honor such services?"

Kerr bowed. "Indeed I would, Miss Wanda." A sort of relief relaxed him. "I'd welcome it. Segments of this command *are* difficult to handle, at times."

Someone in the Yank formation snick-

ered, another laughed. Kerr eyed them with a half-mock severity before snapping, "Attention!"

Jeff thought, He's all right. He's unashamed of a weakness that will become strength. Those men laughed with him, not at him. The pressure's less now.

She was waiting for him, minutes later, when he approached Colonel Warner's quarters. When she stepped from shadows, he halted, regarding her at length.

He said, "You stuck your chin out a while ago, miss."

"You stuck yours out further, clear to the neck, Mr. Keefe, when you remained here. That took courage. May I assure you my father is an understanding person? You will not have to stand alone."

They began walking, and her fragrance was a disturbing thing.

"Is the Colonel still unconscious?"

"No. Sleeping at present. I will pull him through." A silence, then she laughed softly. "I'm an Army brat, Mr. Keefe. I know a lot, get by with a lot—even to flirting with the troopers."

"You're confident, aren't you?" said Jeff Keefe.

The attack came at dawn. But through the early watches of the morning, the defenders of Cottonwood had prepared, and been prepared, for it. Mutineers and regular garrison, non-com and emigrant, they presented a solid fighting front.

Fog rolled in cloud masses across the land, limiting visibility. The Sioux used it for a screen, racing their grass-bellied ponies in and out. They didn't possess many guns. It was mostly bow and arrow.

The settlers' wagons, inside the fort and those abandoned outside, for lack of space, went up in sheets of flaming smoke. The din was deafening, the Indian yells, the gun thunder, the terrorized shrilling of the corralled troop animals. Wanda and the women gave first aid, passed ammunition.

Abruptly the first charge was over. The Sioux fled the flats, taking their casualties, leaving their dead horses strewn about. Men remained vigilant, but minutes wore on.

"That wasn't vicious," Jeff said. He was sooty, with an arrow torn sleeve. "They were just making us flex our muscles."

"Not vicious?" a trooper moaned. "The devil you say!"

AN HOUR passed. The climbing sun thinned out the mists. When the last tatters cleared, they saw the whole picture. Around the full sweep of horizon were Indians, some motionless, others running ponies back and forth.

As they studied it, Wanda clutched Jeff's arm.

A trooper shouted and pointed. Jeff squinted at a speck that had detached itself from a main body on a hill, a mile distant. It came toward the fort, and everybody watched it raptly, while nerves rubbed raw. It was a pinto, and at last they saw it bore a woman rider. They recognized her—Corporal Grundy's squaw!

She came on, and they admitted her. They stood around, eying her like she was a freak. She gave no heed. Only when she singled out Jeff did her expression alter, her hard-black eyes soften.

She said, "This fight much foolish, Mr. Keefe. Your comrades are trapped in Sandy Wash. You all be wipe' out here But we can stop it. Will you come?"

"Where? How can we stop it?"

"You have snake for friend. Sergeant Chipman yonder with Buffalo Hump." She gestured in the direction she'd come. "He make Buffalo Hump believe lie. I alone cannot prove. You alone cannot. Together, both can."

Jeff thought, Whose ways are yours, white or red? He asked, "Are these your people, Mrs. Grundy?"

"They Teton. I am Yankton. From same camp-circles many moons ago."

He wanted to distrust her. She had fled once when he'd needed her. "Why do you think I can do it?"

She actually smiled; sadly, wistfully. "You a good man, Mr. Keefe. Even my Yankee husban' say so." She glanced scathingly at several troopers. One gnawed his lips, despite their char from

cartridge biting. "You a decent man. One cannot hide character. You make mistake in past. Buffalo Hump make one now. But he is *paza*—upright like a tree. Will you come?"

"I will," Jeff said, and knew that the lodestone drawing him into compliance was the prospect of facing Steve Chipman, the blackguard renegade . . . .

He was both magnificent and ludicrous, this chief of the Tetons. Huge, muscular, with a bronze hue that rippled in the sunlight. He wore a bear claw necklace and thigh leggings. But he had these last crammed into a pair of choke-bore boots. And the two feathers he wore—one magpie, one eagle—were thrust aslant from a stovepipe beaver hat.

He must have sensed Jeff's involuntary amusement, for Jeff's features were blanked into solemnity. Tapping the hat, he said, "From Wash'ton." Tapping the boots: "From War Chief Warner."

Jeff sat down in the circle where Buffalo Hump indicated, across from him. Mrs. Grundy sat down also, cross-legged, next to Jeff. He noted the empty spot on his right as he shuttled his gaze around the ring of impassive sub-chiefs. In the background bucks were chanting, cavorting ponies.

Chipman appeared then, tall and catlike, with a grinning smirk that was too forced. For he was minus saber and sidearm. He couldn't shroud the hatred behind the brief glance he gave the girl. Steve Chipman was standing on a brink that might crumble under him, and knew it. Jeff felt no sympathy for him.

Steve laid a palm on Jeff's knee, a false-friendly gesture. What he said, in border Spanish, proved it. "Sorry you saw fit to answer that she-devil's plea. She's brewin' hell, Keefe, so watch out. Oh, yeah—friend Ryland almost cracked and snitched to the Old Man. I brought him on this sashay, and he met an accident."

Jeff stared ahead, taking up another notch on his control. Buffalo Hump was watching them both like a hawk. When he gave a guttural command, the vicinity was cleared. The feathered stone pipe was produced, began making the rounds.

Mrs. Grundy told Jeff, "You gave up your arms to show peace. This is *wacekiya*, for spirit of understanding, for smoke out deceit."

Time meant nothing here. It could, however, break a man whose conscience was guilty. Jeff's wasn't. He sat comparing this Sioux on the sagebrush couch with the dirty, marauding Comanches he'd known. This man had a dignity.

Finally Buffalo Hump said, "I go to Wash'ton, mark a paper of peace. The *wasicu*—the white men—my brother. Now the Cheyenne ride for coups, and the Arapaho, but I not break my word. Until *wasicu* kill my *cinks*—my son."

She said, "I bow my head, tell you again, kind uncle, you allow a snake to crawl in your bed. He bite you, and you are swell with poison and hate."

He studied her. "Not hate, daughter of my skin. Hate kindles fire, and fire destroys." His sharp glance swung to Chipman. "This man warned me ten sleeps ago that soldiers plan to massacre my people. They did it to the Cheyenne. I want to strike then. He say wait until he tell me time is right. Now my *cinks* is dead."

JEFF'S jawline bulged with set muscles. Steve hadn't plotted a single attack to insure their getaway. He'd inflamed the whole Sioux nation.

Jeff said, "A lie is like darkness. You must stare into it for some time before you can see through it."

He heard Steve's heavy breathing. Buffalo Hump's eyes pierced them both.

She said, "Your son, my brave cousin, thought you wrong. He was as *paza* as you, so he come to Cottonwood to warn the White Chief. This he tell me while in jail. I was a fool, for I went to that sergeant, to point the finger at him. He only laughed, but I knew enough to hide in my *tipi*. That kind of laugh, uncle."

Steve's breath was raspy. He almost came erect, then sank back down. But he was gesturing, laughing shakily. "That's nonsense, Buffalo Hump! I'm your friend. I ride with you."

The Sioux's gaze fixed itself on a distant point. Breaking his thought, he addressed Jeff. "She says this man killed my son. She says you saw it. Is that true what she speaks?"

Steve's tension almost shrieked at Jeff. Glancing at him, Jeff saw the twitching corners of his mouth. Jeff looked away quickly—looked toward the distance-blurred rectangle of Fort Cottonwood. Steve Chipman had betrayed it, but he, Jeff, could not seal a doom on Steve Chipman.

Still he knew that now, while these red leaders waited for his words, death was waiting for that frontier command.

He answered simply, "I cannot say."

Mrs. Grundy gave a little cry of dismay, and Buffalo Hump stared intently at him. The chief said, "I think you truth man, yet maybe sacrifice your people yonder to hide truth, protect one man." He shook his massive head. "You *wasicu* are fools."

Shifting abruptly to Steve, he asked, "Why did you turn on your people, walk away? Why do you want my braves at Pebble Ford tomorrow?"

Jeff swung toward Steve, and his fingers were splayed wide, aching to squeeze that neck. Then a calmness came over him. Steve was near panic, licking his lips, his glance bird-jumping from Jeff to the Sioux, and back.

"Tell him, Chip," Jeff said. "Tell him there will be scalps, ponies, guns. From buddies of yours. Tell him to leave the shining bars. You'll take them to Bob Lee—if you don't get lost."

He turned as he rose, facing Buffalo Hump. "I tell you this much. Some of us *wasicu* fools aimed to trick our brothers. Had you attacked them, as this man planned, our escape was sure. But your son came, to talk with the White Chief. He would bring understanding, or a fight too soon. That is the reason why he was killed."

Buffalo Hump stared at Steve Chipman. He was saddened; he was hard. He said, "You lie. You not Sioux in heart. You kill my son."

"No! No, I didn't!"

Chipman was scrambling to his feet. He never gained them. Jeff saw the long-handled, feather-tailed Teton ax streak through the air. When Steve toppled over, it was cleft in his skull . . . .

* * * * *

The chief, in his stovepipe hat and choke-bore boots, accompanied Jeff to Cottonwood. He brought a horse as a gift for Colonel Warner, but the greater gift for Warner was when his bedraggled column, having been under fifteen hours of siege at Sandy Wash, trailed in around noon.

Lieutenant Kerr was given charge of the honor guest, and after they left, Colonel Warner lay pillow-propped in bed, contemplating Jeff and Wanda. "Washington is a long way off, Private Keefe. A damnable lot of our reports never reach there. I have a fear this one won't, so don't lose any sleep."

He studied his wiggling toes. "You will receive a grade promotion before you leave tomorrow with Mr. Kerr's escort for the bullion shipment East. When you return, in all likelihood it will be a junior sergeancy."

"Thank you, sir," Jeff said.

Wanda declared, "Some day you may even be a top sarge."

Colonel Warner wagged a finger at her. "At least it will be a campaigner in the family, not a Washington cake-walker."

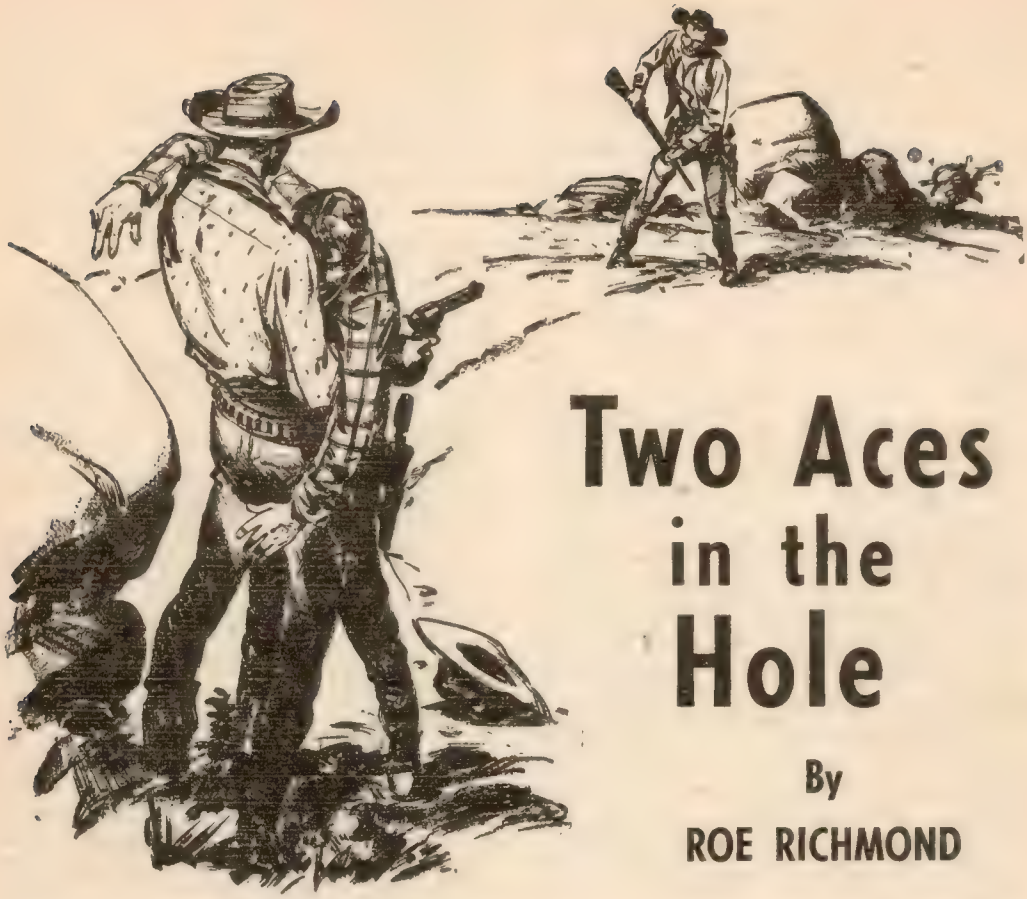
"Why, pops! Come, Mr. Keefe; he's getting personal."

Jeff smilingly moved off with her, until Warner called, "One moment."

Pushed up in bed, he saluted the ex-rebel. "My commendations, Major Keefe. And who knows, in the future, when our national passions have cooled, you may again hold a commission in our Army."

Wanda tossed her head, her perfume tickling Jeff's nose, tingling through him to his feet.

She said, "Who cares, pops? Top sarge is good enough. Everybody knows they're the brains of a command . . . Good-by now."



Two Aces in the Hole

By ROE RICHMOND

JOE DODD wondered who was going to break first. None of them could hold out much longer with the grub gone and the water vanishing fast. He shifted, craned his sunburnt neck and looked around at the other six men on that flat hilltop. Although brush and boulders furnished them with some shade, the heat on the hilltop was terrible in the daytime. And at that altitude the nights were freezing cold. They had a fortune in gold dust, but it wouldn't buy food or water, or passage off this bleak hill in the Gallatins. This was the end of the road for the seven survivors of the Sudbrack gang.

It was afternoon now and the sun beat upon that small pinnacle with savage searing fury, blinding their eyes and frying their brains.

The slow gurgle of Ostrander's breathing came from the deepest shade by the drying seep of water. Their suffering was as nothing to Oz's, with that bullet in his chest. From time to time the lank Skinner McKeel glanced sourly in the direction of the dying man, begrudging Ostrander every drop of water, hating him for making that noise when he breathed.

Big Boguson heaved back from the rimrock on the opposite side, spitting tobacco

Brought to bay by Vigilantes on a sun-blasted mountain peak, Sudbrack's outlaws make their final bloody stand

juice and bulling toward them. "Just a question of time. I say make our move while we got the strength."

"That's what I say too," Kid Cater declared, his voice cracking dryly, his boy's face inflamed under the bronze stubble.

Sudbrack, their leader, stared coldly at them. "No," he said with quiet authority, and Dodd could see the two men shrink under his pale eyes. "What I say is still what counts here."

The lean Ackeret nodded in jerky agreement. "Can't leave Oz. Or carry him out."

"He's dead," Skinner McKeel said, with a disgusted gesture. "He's already—" He broke off as Sudbrack's bleached eyes flickered at him.

Joe Dodd said nothing, still wondering which man would be the first to break. Kid Cater, maybe, for the Kid was going crazy with all that gold in his possession and no place to spend it on women and whisky. Boguson perhaps, because Big Boge wanted to rear up and make a fight of it, no matter how hopeless the odds. There was McKeel, too, wanting to finish the wounded Ostrander off, and Ackeret, who was edgy and highstrung by nature.

Nothing would crack Sudbrack, and Joe Dodd himself had to hang on to the end of this caper.

THEY had been plundering the gold-mining camps of the Beaverhead, Alder Gulch and Virginia City, until that last stage holdup had roused the Vigilantes into driving them out. Skinner McKeel had turned his guns loose on the driver, guard and passengers, swearing that he'd been recognized and couldn't afford to leave any survivors to identify him. Boguson and Kid Cater had opened fire along with him. That cold-blooded massacre had brought the whole country out after them.

Sudbrack had led them in eastward flight with an ever-growing force on their heels, hoping to reach the Big Horn Basin in Wyoming, but Joe Dodd had known they would never make it. On the run for a week, swapping or stealing horses when their mounts wore out, they had ridden the final relays to death in the Gallatin Mountains. Bogged down on foot and surrounded by posses, they had forted up on this blunt hillock three or four days ago. An upland wilderness in the Bozeman Peak area, tangled with timber and brush, slashed with crooked canyons, studded with boulders and outcrops. The Vigilantes were all around them, but hadn't struck their trail or started closing in as yet. But, as the giant Boguson had said, it was simply a matter of time—unless the hunters tired of the chase and went home to their diggings.

Scratching the filthy sweated stubble on his jaws, Joe Dodd contemplated rolling a smoke and decided against it. Tobacco sometimes eased hunger, but it would certainly increase thirst. He licked his lips painfully, but his tongue was too dry to ease the split chapped surfaces.

Boguson lumbered back to the opposite rim to study the landscape below, hopeful perhaps that the enemy was closing up to get it over with. Down by the spring Ostrander was moaning now, a rasp on their flayed nerves, and McKeel eyed him with naked malevolence. Hunched calm and impassive against a pine, Sudbrack, chief of the gang, watched both Boguson and McKeel with his strange colorless eyes. The youthful Kid Cater lay on his stomach staring at the swollen money bags that were so utterly worthless here, and Dodd wondered what sensuous visions were coloring and maddening the Kid's mind.

Ackeret, the high-strung man, strolled toward Dodd, eyes and cheeks sunken in his gaunted face. "Can't stand much more of this, Joe."

Dodd shrugged his rangy shoulders. "Got any other ideas, Ack?"

Ackeret slackened back hopelessly, with a ragged-sleeved forearm across his wasted features.

When Dodd felt Sudbrack's cold glance touch him, he turned to the outlaw leader. "What you think, Sud?"

"One chance. That they get sick of it and pull out."

"About what I figure."

"You're pretty smart for your age. Who'd you run with before, Joe?"

Dodd smiled. "Never was out before."

"You catch on quick," Sudbrack said. "And you take it calm."

Skinner McKeel whirled on them. "Too damn calm if you ask me!"

"Nobody asked you, Skin," said Sudbrack mildly.

"I still got a right to talk, Sud," said McKeel. "I been thinkin' it ain't natural. A greenhorn like him so cool and easy."

Dodd grinned. "You want me to bust out cryin', Skinner?"

McKeel's attempt to spit was a dry failure. "You will before this is done, greenie! I'm goin' to get me a drink."

"No, Skinner," said Sudbrack. "You'll drink when we do."

McKeel's voice rose: "How much longer we goin' to waste water on that stinkin' corpse?"

White fire flared in Sudbrack's eyes as he started to get up, and McKeel was already wilting when Ostrander's faint choked voice came to them: "He's right, Sud. Better off dead. Let Skin shoot me . . . or give me a gun and I'll do it myself." The effort of talking set off a spasm of coughing that racked through them all.

Sudbrack, on his feet in one smooth motion, looked at McKeel for a long chilling moment and went on to kneel beside Ostrander. "We aren't cashin' in yet, Oz," he said gently. "There's always hope as long as a man's got one chip left."

"It ain't worth it," Ostrander panted, rolling his balding head on the blanket. "It takes—too long."

"Can't ever tell." Sudbrack wet a bandanna and wiped the blood from Ostrander's fever-parched mouth. "You might be glad some day."

SKINNER McKEEL watched the scene with murder in his vulture face, and Joe Dodd shifted over to clear the gun on his right thigh. McKeel caught the motion and wheeled with a snarl: "Don't be gettin' ideas, sonny!"

"I won't," Joe Dodd said. "Just makin' sure nobody else does."

"Come to think of it," McKeel snapped viciously, "who brung us up on top here like treed coons?"

Dodd answered softly, "Why, we just kind of drifted up—that's how it seems to me."

McKeel shook his high, small, evil head. "To me, it seems like you was leadin' the way, boy."

Dodd lifted his shoulders indifferently, but the irritable Ackeret sat upright in sudden tense anger. "Could you pick a better place, Skin?"

"You two sidin' each other?" McKeel glared from one to the other. "You joined up late, I recollect, and you always was cozy-like."

"Recruits have to stick together," Joe Dodd said easily, rising to his rangy height in case the wildness in McKeel boiled over, and Ackeret stood up beside him.

At that moment big Boguson returned from making a circuit of the small rock-girded summit. "They're comin' up all around." There was a kind of grim satisfaction in the giant's hoarse tone. "Ain't spotted us yet but they got a notion."

Kid Cater jumped up, slim and lithe with his reckness grin flashing. "It's about time. They'll get a bellyful of it before they ever take this hill!"

"Yeah, that's just dandy," Ackeret, the high-strung man, said dryly. "More fun than we ever had on Idaho Street, Kid."

Joe Dodd laid a big hand on Ackeret's thin shoulder. "Buck up, Ack."

Ackeret shook the hand off. "Don't worry about me. I've smelled as much powder as you have, Joe."

The outlaw leader, Sudbrack, left the wounded man's side and listened gravely to Boguson's report, as the men gathered up their carbines and extra shell belts to take the positions previously assigned. Sudbrack gave them a swallow apiece from his big canteen and said quietly:

"Don't fire until I give the word. Don't do anythin' to give our position away. They may pull out, even if they figure we're up here. They know it'll cost 'em

plenty to get to us."

"They can starve us out," Skinner McKeel grumbled.

"Maybe. But don't forget they aren't eatin' or sleepin' too well either. And they're losin' money every day they're away from their claims. Some of them maybe are losin' their wives or women. We're used to this business where they aren't. In a lot of ways we're still better off than they are." Sudbrack gazed into the west, where the blazing golden sun hung in the molten blue above the Tobacco Roots. "If they don't come before sundown, I've got a hunch they won't come at all. So whatever you do, boys, don't show yourselves and don't start shootin' until I give the word."

With the casual precision of a small military unit in combat, the tattered, bearded, sun-blackened men moved to their respective positions and settled down to wait as comfortably and alertly as possible.

THE tiny hillcrest was roughly triangular, the narrow apex pointing east, the broad base fronting on the west. The eastern approach, almost sheer in spots, was too steep for any general attack from that direction. The fire-brand, Skinner McKeel, had been posted at this peak. Once the fighting started, a sharpshooter of his quality could wreak terrible havoc along both flanks of the hillside.

Kid Gater froze Joe Dodd. Even as and cold-nerved Sudbrack, himself, the southwest. Any large-scale frontal assault would have to come up the long gradual slope from the west, in which case both men could cover their flanks. Joe Dodd was stationed at the center of the western rim, with big Boguson at his left and slender Ackeret on his right. Joe studied these positions thoroughly, visualizing the showdown ahead. Once he had them firmly fixed, his mind went back along the flaming history of the Sudbrack band.

So cleverly had Sudbrack operated that it was a long time before the miners realized they were being victimized by one highly organized outfit. For two years the crimes were seen as isolated and haphazard misdemeanors, committed by various prospectors or gamblers driven to desperation by the loss of their claims or pokes. The few victims who were left alive seemed totally unable to describe or identify the robbers. But gradually a pattern emerged, becoming clear when old Bill Dodrill and his partner, left for dead, lived long enough to give the first real clue to the identity of the bandits. Joe wondered how many innocent men the Vigilantes had strung up in the past several years.

In their way, the Vigilantes were as ruthless as the outlaws. A suspect was named in meeting, quite possibly out of pure spite, and after an elementary investigation his cabin was posted with the dread warning: "3-7-77," over a skull-and-bones design. The dimensions of a grave: three feet wide, seven feet long, and seventy-seven inches deep. Then, if the man didn't leave within twenty-four hours, he was taken out and hanged in public. And everyone seemed satisfied that justice had been done.

But the holdups and murders went on—until that final slaughter of all the stage coach occupants by Skinner McKeel and Boguson and Kid Cater. Recalling it still made Joe Dodd retching sick. He was thankful he had never thrown down on a helpless man, never fired a shot except in self-defense.

Far down the slope there were sounds of movement, and occasionally Joe Dodd glimpsed a blurred form. But the posse seemed to be circling instead of climbing. Time dragged and the fiery ball of the sun hung motionless above the Tobacco Mountains, and the heat was enough to scorch all sanity from a man's brain and shrivel his insides to cinder-ashes. How long would it be before the youth, Cater, cut loose a shot, or Boguson bellowed out in bull-like defiance, or Ackeret, already wire-taut, cracked screaming mad under the strain?

Glancing to his left, Joe could see Boguson and Sudbrack, and turning to the

right brought the slender Ackeret and Kid Cater into view. Only Skinner McKeel was out of sight behind him, along with the dying Ostrander, and there was no telling what that murderous gunman, McKeel, might do. But Sud would keep an eye on Skinner, on all of them, in fact. Sud was quite a man. With a different quirk of nature, he might have been a great law-officer, instead of an outlaw chief.

Now the sun was lowering and reddening at last, dipping nearer the Tobacco Roots. It seemed now that no attack would be coming before sundown. The Vigilantes might be waiting for darkness, but more likely they were falling back to make camp, or moving out altogether before the light failed. Joe Dodd had an idea Sudbrack's prediction was right, as usual: "If they don't come up this afternoon, they'll pull out for home."

Ackeret stirred on his right, and Joe glanced over that way. Ackeret looked at him in a queer, haunted, questioning way, and Joe Dodd nodded, as if in reassurance.

A FEW minutes later a low cry from Kid Gater froze Joe Dodd. Even as he turned he noticed Ackeret had jumped up and started moving, clambering over boulders and crashing through brush toward the open slope below. Kid Cater dropped his carbine and took after Ackeret, pistol in hand and running hard.

Joe Dodd got up, leaving his rifle on the ground, and moved toward Boguson, who was cursing over his leveled carbine. "No, Boge! Let him go. Let the Kid take him. A shot'll bring 'em all up here."

Boguson hesitated, his barrel wavering, then swore and lined it up again. "You're crazy as he is! I'll stop the son—"

While striding forward, Joe Dodd had drawn his Colt and now he smashed the long steel barrel down on the large head of the intently-aiming giant, with wicked force. Boguson's knees bent and the rifle clattered down, but despite the blow, the big man wheeled and lunged ponderously at his assailant. Joe struck again, feeling the shock all the way up his arm. This time Boge grunted, sagged and pitched forward.

Joe caught him and held that massive bulk up against himself as a shield, for he saw Sudbrack coming with his carbine ready. A gun blasted on the hillside below, and Joe wondered whether his friend, Ackeret, or Kid Cater had taken that bullet.

"Drop it, Sud!" Joe pushed his gunhand through between Boguson's left arm and body, holding it steady in spite of the vast dead weight on him. Sudbrack showed only the mildest of surprise.

Sudbrack's pale eyes flicked from Joe's muzzle to his own barrel. "A slug from this might go through both of you—at this range."

"You wouldn't have time to fire. Let it drop, Sud."

Sudbrack let the rifle fall. "I don't get this, Joe."

"Drop your belt now. I'll tell you when I've got time."

Sudbrack slowly shook his head. "They'll never hang me, Joe." His right hand streaked for the holster.

Holding low, Joe Dodd fired. The .44 slashed Sudbrack's legs from under him, tumbling him awkwardly to earth. Unable to support Boguson's weight any longer, Joe shouldered the senseless hulk off and watched it topple backward. As for Sudbrack, he was lying where Joe's bullet had knocked him, conscious but inert from shock . . . Joe turned his back to the sun and looked across the hilltop for the vicious little killer, McKeel.

Skinner was coming all right, lank and loose and deadly. He was already passing the little spring, and he had a bead on Joe Dodd and the Skinner seldom missed with a Colt. Not at this distance . . . Joe tried to bring his barrel to bear, knowing he was a dead man. But when McKeel's gun flamed, the shot went straight into the dirt. Joe Dodd fired, but McKeel was abruptly gone, floundering on his hands and knees as the slug screamed overhead. Only then did Joe realize that Ostrander —good old Oz—had somehow stuck out

a boot and tripped McKeel as he went by.

Skinner McKeel fired once more from the ground. The vicious breath of it swished past Joe Dodd's face as he threw down from the recoil and thumbed another shot at the kneeling man. McKeel heaved upright, teetered back a few steps, jerked forward and fell on his face.

"Thanks, Oz," called Joe Dodd. "I'll remember that."

"Pleasure—kid," panted Ostrander, grimacing in an attempt to smile.

Joe turned to see what was going on behind him, and saw Ackeret standing over Sudbrack and Boguson, the big man still in a senseless sprawl. Joe walked to them, smiling at Ackeret. "I was afraid the Kid had you, Ack."

"He was so surprised when I whirled around, he never got off a shot." Ackeret grinned faintly, hefting the gun he had taken from Sudbrack.

Sudbrack looked up at them without emotion. "Where's the posse?"

"Comin' up—be here in a minute," Ackeret told him.

The pale eyes swerved to Dodd. "Maybe you've got time to tell me about it now, Joe?"

"It was the double-cross, Sud. But we had reasons."

"I had it comin' anyway. I just wish you hadn't shot so low."

"Remember Bill Dodrill? He was my dad, Sud. And his partner was Ack's father."

Sudbrack nodded somberly. "You boys did a good job on us. Nobody but Skinner suspected, and he was suspicious of everybody. I don't deserve any favors but I'm askin' one. Finish the job, Joe—or hand me a gun to use on myself. I don't want to hang."

Joe Dodd thought it over, and nodded at Ackeret. "Reckon you rate that much, Sud. Give him back his gun, Ack."

Ackeret did so unhesitatingly, and they turned away from Sudbrack without any fear whatever of getting bullets in the back. There was a muffled explosion behind them. Joe Dodd winced, and Ackeret strove in vain to repress a shudder of horror.

Silently, the crimson of the low sun at their backs, they walked to the spring to get a drink, comfort old Ostrander, and wait for the Vigilantes to come up and join them.

The Summer of the RED DEATH

SEVENTEEN thousand Indians along the Upper Missouri died of smallpox in the summer of 1837 as a direct result of thirty squaws being "vaccinated" by an amateur doctor—one Jacob Halsey, commander of an American Fur Company trading post. Most of the fighting strength of the Blackfeet, Assiniboins, Mandans, Arikaras and Crows were wiped out in the terrible epidemic. The friendly Mandans were hardest hit, only thirty families of this once numerous tribe remaining at summer's end. Only the implacably hostile Sioux, who avoided the white man's trading posts almost entirely, escaped the worst of the plague.

At the height of the epidemic an employee of the fur company reported in his journal that "the atmosphere for miles is poisoned by the stench of the hundreds of carcasses unburied. The women and children are wandering in groups without food, or howling over the dead. The men are flying in every direction. The proud, warlike and noble Blackfeet are no more. Their deserted lodges are seen on every hill. No sound but the raven's croak and the wolf's howl breaks the solemn stillness. The scene of desolation is appalling beyond the power of the imagination to conceive."

Many of the Indians, rather than wait to be affected, rushed to the river and deliberately drowned themselves. Others waited for the first ominous symptoms of the disease before committing suicide. Frantic husbands and fathers, rather than leave their families to starve after their deaths, cut their loved ones' throats before turning the bloody knives upon themselves. Everywhere the situation was one of indescribable horror.

By late summer the worst was over. The power of the tribes was broken forever; the way opened for the white man along the whole length of the Upper Missouri. Disease had accomplished in one frightful summer what rifles and fire-water had failed to do in two decades. —*Norman B. Wiltsey*

Muxlow swung his fists wildly

CRISIS at Cherry Creek

A fifteen-year-old boy proves his worth at an isolated stage station

By BEN T. YOUNG

PA was getting sort of provoked at me. "Dave," he said to me, "you quit nagging for leave to join the Army. You won't be sixteen till next December."

"But I'm most as big as Tom Carhart," I pointed out.

"In body only. A man's got to have something under his hat, too. A mere kid can't be depended on in a tight spot."

As usual I hadn't made any headway in that argument, so I ambled out of the barn to watch for the east-bound stage which was due any minute. This Cherry Creek stop on the Cheyenne River Line was only a swing station where teams were changed and, as Lafe Pingree was there as stock-tender, Pa didn't need me to

help run the place. Anyhow, I'd set my heart on joining the cavalry over at Fort Sully, on the Missouri.

Before long, trace-chains were rattling and brake-shoes squealing, as Ed Ketchum brought the east-bound in. Pa and Lafe were making ready to change the four-horse hitch, and several passengers climbed out of the old Concord to ease their aching bones.

There was a lone woman among them, and at once my sister Amy popped out of the kitchen to talk to her. "Sort of wearing, isn't it?" Amy said, and smiled.

"My land, yes." The woman looked around at the corrals, and the barn and sod-roofed station built of cottonwood logs. "How do you stand living in such a place? You the only woman here?"

Amy nodded. "I keep house for my father and young brother. However, I'm to be married soon, to an Army man. We—"

But the woman's attention had been caught by the goings-on of old Jim Brill. With his forage cap cocked over one weather-faded eye, Jim was hunkered down beside the brass-plate-and-iron-wire contraption against the station wall. With his left thumb he pushed in and held a button; then, after licking the tips of his right-hand fingers, touched them to the ground. Seeing his hand jerk, I knew he'd got the hoped-for shock, and the line was in order.

This was something I knew about so, hauling off my hat, I horned into the powwow. "Ma'am," I explained as Brill went back inside. "This is a relay station on the Army's telegraph line from Fort Sully to Fort Meade over in the Black Hills. He's detailed as operator, and has just made one of the three-times-a-day tests required by regulations. I've learned to send and receive, too; and repair breaks in the line when wind or ice—"

"Please get aboard, ma'am," Ed Ketchum called, and soon the coach was gone.

FOR a minute or so Amy and I stood watching the high-rising cloud of dust chasing the stage. It was all gold-colored in the rays of the westering sun. But it wasn't yet time to be looking for the cavalry detachment due to camp at Cherry Creek that night. It wouldn't be long, though. By the time Corporal Tom Carhart had off-saddled and cared for his horse, Amy would be all pranked out in her best duds and have supper ready.

As we turned toward the station doorway, there stood Nate Muxlow, leaning against the wall with thumbs hooked in his gun-belt; and I'd about as lief seen old Sitting Bull painted for war. Resting on their heels by the corral fence to which their ponies were tied, were Hank Oster and Ike Glemo.

"Howdy," Nate said, and grinned at her.

"Thought you were down at Pierre." Amy's voice was hard and flat as a stove-lid.

He wagged his head. As Amy hurried on inside, there was something in his eyes I couldn't put a name to, but didn't like. I went in, too.

In the corner of the public room (which wasn't used much because this was—like I said—just a swing station) Jim Brill lay on his bunk beside the table on which were his key and sounder. Pa and Lafe were still busy feeding and grooming the horses and washing harness. Usually I helped with those chores, but with Muxlow around I somehow felt it would be wise to stay close to Amy.

She was shaping up two pies filled with fresh-gathered choke-cherries. I sat there in the kitchen watching her, and thinking about Corporal Tom Carhart whose wife she'd soon be. There, now, was a whole man; ramrod-straight in his horse-soldier's uniform, and neat and polite and reliable. He was a direct contrary to Muxlow who, in most folks' estimation, was lower than a snake in a wheel-track.

I'd long thought that Muxlow and his side-kicks were probably horse-thieves, and bootleggers to the Indians up at the agency. A couple of times, when a stage or a home-seeker's wagon or a lone traveler had been waylaid and robbed, I'd felt that Muxlow was at the bottom of it. I

wished he'd stay away from Cherry Creek, at least till Amy was married and gone.

Later, when she'd got all prettied up in her best dress with an apron over it, and was getting supper, I heard Pa washing at the bench outside. Then he came in. "Muxlow's ganderin' round again," he sighed. "I've already had a run-in with him."

"What about?" I asked.

"Horse feed. As usual, him and the other two were fixing to turn their cayuses in the corral, but this time I told them the stage company don't run a free feed-lot, and to stake their ponies out on the prairie."

"And they can feed themselves out there, too," Amy declared, forking into the boiling potatoes. "This is no boarding house, and —"

"How about Heap Spit?" I teased her.

She smiled. "That old Indian's all right, and welcome to a hand-out any time; but I'll no longer have those hoodlums—"

"They don't bed down in there with me any more, either," Brill said, coming in from the public room. "That floor's for stage passengers who might get stuck here overnight, and I don't begrudge shelter for a decent horseback traveler once in a while. But those back-trail riders have worn out their welcome so far's I'm concerned. Let 'em sleep outside, or in the barn with the horses."

"No, ye don't," Lafe grinned, coming in with an armload of stove-wood. "Me and the horses and deer-mice are just as particular as you."

Trouble building up, I worried, keeping an ear cocked for the cavalry. With a few soldiers at hand, Muxlow would likely behave himself tonight; but Tom Carhart, seeing a strange young buck around, was apt to get bushy-tailed and anything could happen.

When we heard the outfit coming, and stepped out into the dusk to watch, the three toughs were sitting on the wash-bench. While they'd likely heard what had been said indoors, they didn't let on. "Supper ready yet?" Muxlow asked, sniffing the smell of those hot pies.

"There won't be room at the table," Pa told them. "We're having company. You boys always pack grub; go eat it."

"Well now, Sanborn, I sure don't like to be treated like no Injun," Muxlow growled. "What—"

HE stopped as Glemo nudged him, and all three fell to watching the soldiers. They showed no surprise at their coming. Detachments such as this often passed between the posts, so it was natural they should think nothing of it.

As a matter of fact I was a little surprised myself at the number of troopers, and that they'd fetched a mule-drawn escort wagon. When Brill had told us that Tom Carhart would be with the usual detail, siding the paymaster in his Daugherty wagon, we'd expected only Tom and four or five others. Here, though, was a whole platoon under a sergeant.

Amy probably wasn't giving all this much thought; for in two shakes the picket-line had been set up and here came Tom. By now Pa and Lafe had gone off to offer whatever the troopers might lack for their bivouac; and, spotting a special crony among them, Brill had left, too. At the risk of not hearing the coffee should it boil over, Amy stepped away from the stoop and the group of the hoodlums.

Either Tom didn't see them in the shadows, or didn't give a hoot, for he dragged off his hat, threw both arms around her, and kissed her smack on the mouth. Then they went inside.

"So that's how the land slopes," Muxlow growled as I followed them.

Because Pa was never short with me before company, and because having Tom around always put him in a good humor, I asked again at supper about joining the Army. "Now that Amy's taught me to read and write and cipher, and I've read every book on the place including earning my own living," I said. "When Tom and these others go through here on the way back to Fort Sully, I could go along."

Pa didn't seem at all vexed, just went on chewing a chunk of sage-hen meat;

so I poured on more argument. "Many's the time I've heard you tell about riding with Phil Sheridan before you were sixteen."

"There was a war on then," he grinned. "Now, it's different. They're more particular."

"But, shucks," I said. "I can ride and shoot—"

"More to it than that. A man's got to be able to think quick in a pinch, lest he may sometime get himself killed—and his comrades as well."

"I'd bet on Dave in a tight spot," Jim Brill put in. "He's got more gumption than the average buckaroo. He'd make a top-notch soldier."

As Pa set great store by Jim Brill, that had an effect; and I could see him begin to give a little. "If you'd just write out your consent," I begged.

Then dogged if Tom Carhart didn't shake his head. "That wouldn't do a bit of good, Dave," he told me. "Since being here last I asked the sergeant-major about it and he said that even with the written consent of his father or only living parent or legally appointed guardian, a boy under sixteen can't be enlisted without special authority from the Adjutant General of the Army."

Well, that sure set me back; but I wasn't going to give in. "How would I go about getting that?" I asked.

Not knowing how much I wanted to be a soldier, they all laughed. But it wasn't funny to me.

"You'd have to be somebody right special, son," Pa said kindly. "Somebody the Army felt it couldn't do without. Just put the whole matter out of your mind for the present."

Just then Brill, whose table seat was nearest the doorway into the public room so he could hear his instruments sound off, held up his hand for silence and cocked his head.

ALWAYS interested in the telegraph, I listened, too. But, not only was the sounder not chattering our CC call, it was quiet as a cat on a cushion.

Not satisfied, though, Brill got up and tiptoed to the doorway. "Muxlow, put down those papers and get away from the table!" he roared. "Get plumb outside!"

Hardly breathing, we heard Muxlow move across the plank floor. "Listen, you snipe-gutted old blister," Muxlow snarled. "If that corner is Gov'ment property, all right. I'm off it. But I'm a-gettin' sick and tired of you toplofty buzzards in uniform. And that goes for that purty one eatin' there in the kitchen, too."

Quick as powder Tom was on his feet. As a rule he was calm, but he sure looked riled now; and puzzled as well. "Who's that?" he asked Pa.

"Please, Tom!" Amy grasped his arm. "He's just a trouble-maker trying to talk up a fight."

"Well, he's done so."

"Let it ride, son," Pa cautioned. "He packs a notched gun."

But jerking free of Amy's grasp, Tom shoved Brill aside and marched into the public room. Amy had been following, till Brill stopped her. I edged past them.

"Look, cowboy," Tom said in a voice rough as sandpaper. "From what I hear you're not welcome here, so— Now don't pull that gun! You shoot just once and those boys outside will swarm in here and massacre you. So haul out peaceable, or toss that hardware on the bunk and use your fists."

"And no snide tricks, either," Pa added, coming in with his Winchester. "If you aim to fight, unbuckle that belt and put the whole works aside. Don't you dare show a hide-out gun!"

"Shut up, you old smooth-bore!" Muxlow's voice, as he shucked his belt, sounded like the warning whirr of a prairie rattler. "Some day," he went on, "I'll fix your wagon, too; and make that snippy wench—" Breaking off, he lunged at Tom who had barely got out of his coat.

"Oh!" Amy cried as they crashed together.

Muxlow's first swipe had caught Tom on the cheekbone. Backward he fell, then

rolled. But before he'd got to his feet, Muxlow's boot-toe had driven into his ribs. Down he went again.

Hot under the collar, I stared. The menfolks were cussing under their breaths, too; but this was a frontier fight where anything went. Unless Muxlow pulled another gun, we couldn't do a thing. Amy would have done something, you bet; but when she reached for the carbine, Pa slapped her hand away.

Tom was up once more. As Muxlow swung, Tom went inside the punch, letting it slide off his shouder; and sent in a left and right to the head.

But big Muxlow barely slowed. Tom ducked the next smash at his jaw, but took one in the brisket that sent him against a chair. He stumbled, caught himself and twisted sidewise, kicking the chair against Muxlow.

Grabbing it up, Muxlow swung at Tom's head. But Tom ducked. Off-balanced, Muxlow fell.

"Now!" I yelled.

"Damn!" Pa growled, because Muxlow's outflung legs had knocked Tom down, too. He fell almost beside Muxlow, and got a backhanded smack on the nose that brought blood. Rolling away, he took the chair with him.

They got up together. Taking benefit of the pause, Brill slithered along the wall to where he could fend them away from his instrument-table and lighted lamp.

Muxlow's teeth were bared. There was a crazy light in his eyes. He was breathing like a crib-biting horse.

Sudden as a thunderclap the outside door opened and in stamped a saddle-warped old sergeant. "What's goin' on?" he roared as Amy loosed a little whimper of relief.

"Private fight, Werner," Tom panted. "Keep out of it."

"Indeed I'll not keep out of it. Take shame to yourselves, both of you, for carryin' on so before a lady and tearin' up Mr. Sanborn's nice house. Now get back to your courtin', Corporal, or I'll have you under arrest. And you, Muxlow, or whatever your name is—"

But Muxlow plainly didn't aim to let the tough-looking trooper prod him into another fight. "What?" he growled, fingering a cut lip.

"Gather up them two bums that's with you and pull your freight."

"This here stage station ain't Army property," Muxlow argued.

"It's an Army camp tonight. Come on! Out you go, and be quiet about it lest you make that poor old paymaster sleepin' peaceful in his tent."

BY the time Tom had tended his hurts and policed himself, a fresh pot of coffee had boiled and Sergeant Werner had come back to have a cup and a wedge of pie with us. "Well, Tom," he grinned, "you look none the worse for that randy-do."

"Shucks, outweighed as he was, Tom was wearing him down," Pa said proudly. "In another few minutes Muxlow would have quit."

"Sorry I couldn't finish him," Tom grumbled. "He's a danger to Amy, Mr. Sanborn. Keep close watch over her. You and Dave and Brill and Pingree had best keep guns handy for the next time he shows up."

"You're right, Tom," Sergeant Werner agreed. "The sooner you take her away from here, the better."

"Why wait?" Amy blurted. "If we can't make do with a corporal's pay, I'll find work with one of the officers' families."

"Now there's a smart girl, Tom," Werner chuckled. "On the way back to Sully we'll take her along, and that missionary up at the agency can tie the knot."

"Suits me fine," Tom said, but he still looked worried. "However, with that loaded wagon slowing us down, it's a three-day march from here to Meade. Allowing two more days to get back, makes a total of five days. In the meanwhile—"

"Now don't be hintin' that you should be left here."

"I wasn't hinting that at all," Tom flared. "I've never yet let personal matters get in the way of my duties as a

soldier."

"Bosh, I was just havin' my little joke," Werner said laughingly, with a wink at Amy. "But I see your point. Now Brill, here, has little enough to do; so, much as I dislike givin' the old rumdum a pleasant duty, I'm takin' it upon myself to make him responsible for the safety of this pretty lass. Like as not he could no longer fight his way out of a bushel basket."

"Want to try it, Jack?" Brill grinned. Then at once the grin faded. "I'm honored, ma'am," he said to Amy.

"Thank you, Jim. But you can rest easy for now. Those trouble-makers are gone till tomorrow, anyway."

"And it's right glad I am," Sergeant Werner sighed, filling his pipe. "Like thievin' Injuns they kept pesterin' the teamster, askin' questions, and tryin' to see what was in his wagon."

Brill nodded. "Likely that's why Muxlow was sneakin' a look through my message file. Figured maybe there'd be some mention of that wagon and its cargo."

"Is it a secret?" I asked.

Rising, Werner shook his head. "Just a few chests of new-model Springfields for the Seventh over at Meade. And ammunition for the same. The only reason for the extra size of the paymaster's escort is to have enough hands to help with the wagon should it bog down. And now, good folks, I'm obliged for your hospitality. Good night."

TOM was helping Amy clear up the kitchen, and I had gone into the room shared with Pa. Of a sudden glass crashed somewhere, and from outside came yells and the sound of running feet.

"It's Brill!" Pa called into the kitchen. "He was pullin' off his shirt when a slug came through the north window. Quick, Amy, we need your help."

By that time I'd reached Brill's bunk where he'd flopped, holding his bloody shoulder and cussing like a rusty windmill. Amy and Tom and Pa were there, too. "Here, old-timer," Pa said, offering a tin-cup of whisky.

"I heard the shot—it came from way off somewhere!" Lafe panted, busting in on a high lope.

"Never mind that now," Amy ordered. "Pa, get Jim straightened out in bed and that undershirt off. Tom, bring boiling water and the salt box. I'll get bandages."

Then Sergeant Werner bulged in. "No, I didn't set no one to chasin' the whelps," he said in answer to Pa's question. "It would be no use in this dark, and us needin' time to get horses saddled. That big moose had a rifle in his saddle-boot, so I know it was them. I'll keep it in mind. Now, Brill, this looks to be nothin' more than a smashed collar-bone—not a whit worse than you got in that Warbonnet fight years back."

"Oh, we'll fix him up." Amy was smiling as she hurried back, but looking as if she dreaded the task ahead.

And it was pretty bad, with Tom and Werner holding Brill while she poured hot salt-water into the wound and bound it. "He'll have to be taken to a doctor," she said, getting Sergeant Werner aside. "There's splintered bone and danger of gangrene—" She let it hang there, watching Werner's worried eyes.

"Three days to Fort Meade is too long," he growled. "If I could just work that dam' telegraph—"

"I can," I said.

"You?" He was plainly flabbergasted. "Well, I'll be—jiggered! Now if you'll just ask the operator at Sully—"

"Look," Tom muttered, joining us. "Brill knows what's fretting you and says to quit worrying. He says Dave can work the wire all right, and suggests that in the morning he ask Fort Sully to send a relief operator on the stage. Till he gets here, Dave can handle any messages there are."

"But it's Brill I'm worryin' about, not the telegraph," Werner grumbled.

Tom nodded. "He's got that figured out, too; says he can ride the east-bound tomorrow easy as not. Now I'll sit up with—"

"No," Amy cut in. "You've got a hard ride ahead. I'll keep watch over him and the sounder, too; and call Dave if need be. Now get out to your blankets, both of you."

They started, but at the door Tom stopped, and brought Werner back. "Brill was to guard Amy," he said. "What now?"

"Fiddlesticks, don't bother about me." She put a hand on both their arms. "It was nice of you, Sergeant, to show concern and make that arrangement. But Pa and Dave and Lafe can tough up if need be; and I'm not such a poor hand with a gun myself. Anyway, that new operator will get here only a few hours after you've gone, so we'll be five to one, should Muxlow come back."

HAVING sent Pa and Lafe to bed, too (I was bound I'd stay there with her,) we sat beside Brill's bunk, now and again bathing his feverish face, and listening to his labored breathing and the slow ticking of the wall-clock as it ate away the weary hours. There were no other noises, save the rattling of the yellowing leaves on the cottonwoods, and the now-and-then yelp of a coyote.

But at the first hint of daybreak things began to stir. We heard the sounds of horses being fed and saddled, the clatter of mess-gear, and the cussing as the mules were harnessed.

Our own household was awake, too; with Pa firing up the cookstove, and Lafe packing in wood and water. Cat-footing into her bedroom Amy quickly changed into a calico dress, washed her face and hands, and began to get breakfast.

Tom's goodby was hasty and worried. "Be ready the fifth day from now," he told Amy. "Meantime, if your menfolks let anything happen—"

"They won't." She managed to muster a smile, and waved to Werner. "Goodby, Sergeant. We'll take good care of Jim."

With a gloved hand Sergeant Werner touched his hat brim, then faced his line of already-mounted troopers. "Left by two's," he bawled. "Ho!" And soon Cherry Creek station was alone again.

Back in the kitchen Amy gave Pa and Lafe and me out oatmeal and flapjacks and coffee, and snatched a bite herself. Then, seeing that Brill was awake, she took him a bowl of gruel. The old file was right chipper, and opined that with help he could get into his clothes.

"Don't overdo," she cautioned. "Soon as Pa has a minute, he'll shave you and help you dress, but it will be hours before that east-bound stage comes. And that reminds me. Dave, you'd better call Fort Sully about that relief operator."

Feeling important as an adjutant on parade I moved to the table, closed the key-switch and rapped out two dots—dash—dot, then three dots. It was the Fort Sully call, but brought no answer. Again I tried. The sounder stayed silent.

"Funny," Brill said. "Try Fort Meade."

I did. Still nothing. Hustling outside I tested the line. Dead as a can of corned beef. "Darn," I said, wondering. There'd been no uncommon-hard wind, and while an itchy range-cow was apt to run against and knock down one of the flimsy poles, it wasn't likely to happen both ways from Cherry Creek at once. Then, like the smash, smash of a war-club, the truth hit me. Muxlow! He'd cut us off. It meant trouble.

Right quick I told Brill, and what he said while reaching for his Army Colt wasn't very genteel. "Your Pa and Pingree got their guns handy?"

I nodded, then skipped into my room for the old Butterfield revolver, a relic which Pa hadn't thought I could tinker back into shape. Making sure of its loads, I rammed it inside my shirt and went out. Down by the blacksmith shop, Pa and Lafe were resetting the shoes on a horse. Keeping from their sight (and making no more noise than a butterfly) I caught Reno, the old bay charger which Brill always kept corralled for just such times.

I took Brill's McClellan saddle, too, for the saddle-bags held the pliers and short lengths of iron wire needed for splicing. Leading Reno from the corral and behind

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a cherry thicket, I swung aboard. It was bad to outfox Pa this way, but it would save argument.

The line to Fort Sully must be repaired first, and when the commanding officer learned of the trouble, he'd take action. But a mile down the road I saw that the line was beyond fixing with the material at hand. A rotting pole had been pushed over, the sagging wire cut in two places, and a twenty-foot length dragged from sight.

Now what? If they'd cut the Fort Meade wire last night, the troopers would have by this time come upon the break. But a first class job like this would stump them, too. Surely Werner wouldn't have gone on, knowing what it meant. More likely, Muxlow had waited till the column had passed, then cut the line. In that case he might now be headed back for the station.

FOR a minute my thoughts were flying around like bees in a bottle. I had to do the right thing, but what was it? There wasn't much time to decide. Being forewarned, the folks at the station wouldn't be caught flat-footed, and could fort up and make a good fight. If I went back there maybe we'd all be penned in, and the stages robbed as they stopped for horses. On the other hand, with me on the loose, Muxlow could run into trouble.

Leaving the road, I put Reno across the now-dry bed of the Cheyenne River and into a draw between the yellow hills. Keeping off the skyline I'd circle the station, overtake the slowmoving column, and leave the rest to the soldiers.

Kicking Reno into an all-out gallop I let him have his head. But the years had stacked up on him, and we were barely past the station when he slowed to a walk. It was vexing, but he had to have his breather.

Suddenly he snorted, stopped, and stood with ears pointing. A rider was coming. He'd seen me, and right now old Reno couldn't have outrun a crippled calf. I drew the Butterfield and waited.

Then it became clear that the oncoming pony was a pinto whose rider drummed his flanks at every stride. Indian! Recognizing friendly old Heap Spit, I put the gun away.

"How," said Heap Spit to me. With a yank on the war-bridle he stopped.

Not liking Indians, Reno wanted to pull foot.

"How," I answered as he whirled and danced.

For once Heap Spit's face, wrinkled as a burnt boot, wasn't wooden. He looked upset. *"Lila ota."* He thumped his chest.

"All right, *what* do you know?"

Hastily, then, with a mixture of sign-talk, his own lingo and white-man, he told of the scheme he'd overheard. Muxlow had planned to hold up the Army paymaster. Stumped, though, by the unexpected size of the escort, he'd made medicine with a hunting party of wild young bucks from the agency, promising that if they'd suddenly surround and kill the soldiers during the noonday halt, they could have the cargo of the freight wagon. And at little risk to themselves, because there'd be no pickets nor vedettes.

Getting his share of the money, Muxlow would grab up Amy on the way past the stage station and pull out of these parts. Fired with whisky, and still hating the pony-soldiers because of past troubles, the Indians (maybe thirty-odd) were already skulking in the hills, waiting. The hoodlums, not planning to hazard their necks in the fight, were dogging the column, ready to swoop in and get their plunder when the danger was past.

"Great snakes, why didn't you tell the soldiers?" I fumed.

"Me tell you," Heap Spit said. "You tell talking wires, fix'm quick."

Like a bat leaving a cave I lined out. Not yet mid-morning, it would be two hours before the outnumbered column would halt to eat and rest. By being saving of Reno's wind and strength we could catch up before that. But I'd have to keep cat-eyed for Muxlow, Oster and Glemo who'd be tagging behind. Pulling down

[*Turn page*]

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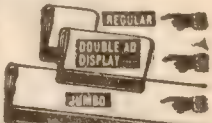

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to a trot, then a fast walk, we moved heedfully along.

There really wasn't much danger yet, but nearer the column I'd have to take care lest the hoodlums (who'd have more sense than to follow the road) had chosen this side of it for their slinking along. At least they weren't at the station, which was a comfort to know.

Thirty minutes passed. Forty. We'd hit a smart canter again when Reno stopped, seeming uneasy as he circled his ears and sniffed the air. Feeling my hair stir, I reined up into a brush lined gully, following its winding course till I reached the north side of a hill. Putting Reno up the slope, I took a careful look over its crest.

Great Caesar. My nerves slacked off like busted fiddle strings. In the road, almost below us, the covered wagon had broken down, and most of the command, less the horse-holders, was working to repair it.

In ten minutes my troubles would be gones like the buffalo.

Seeing his cronies down yonder, Reno was jingling his bitrings and pawing the stones, adding that racket to the noise of the wind. Being also impatient, I turned my eyes to search out a way down the slope.

MY GOSH! Hidden from the road, clusters of mounted Indians were working their way eastward. Likely a scout had reported the soldiers' bad fix and, restless, the bucks were coming to jump the column now. Quickly I backed Reno, to get out of sight and head for the troopers.

Then, sudden as lightning, a hand gripped my belt from behind and I was yanked backward out of the saddle as a gun-barrel missed my head and chopped down on my shoulder.

Plumb spooked, Reno had kicked and left out so fast that whoever held me lost his footing on the gravelly slant, and we both went down like a landslide. His hold on me was broken. Too scared to think I rolled away, tore the Butterfield

from inside my shirt and let fly. Through the smoke I saw him get up, and fired again.

Scrambling sideways lest he shoot right back, I got clear of the smoke. But he'd dropped his gun and was holding his side. It was Muxlow. Down to the right I saw three ground-tied ponies. Afoot, Oster and Glemo were climbing warily toward me. Loosing two shots their way, I legged it over the crest of the hill and down.

My luck was holding. Some of the troopers had spotted Reno or heard the gun-fire. Anyway, three had leaped into their saddles and were coming hell-to-split. I waved my hat, pointing west to where the Indians (suddenly dubious) had halted.

NOW MORE troopers had mounted. Drawing their revolvers they took heed of my pointing and put spurs into their excited bays.

Into the hills they poured like vengeful hornets, and the Indians hauled out for elsewhere.

The first three troopers were riding me down. "Dave!" Tom yelled, unloading on the run and grabbing me. "What's up?"

"Back yonder!" I panted. "Muxlow! The others!"

With a whoop Werner waved his remaining partner along.

"Dave," Tom said in a man-to-man way when I'd told what had happened. "Your Pa now can't say you're not grown up enough to wear the uniform. The Adjutant General can be persuaded, too. You've got it whipped."

I nodded and gulped. The worry and excitement and all had got me upset, and I'd choked up like a doggone kid.

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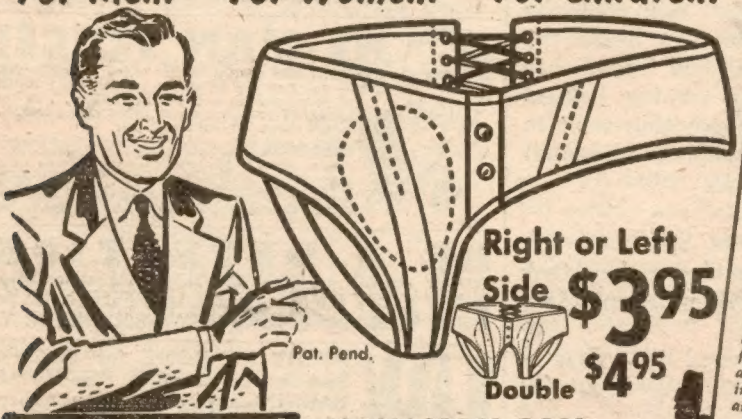

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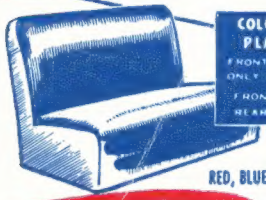

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